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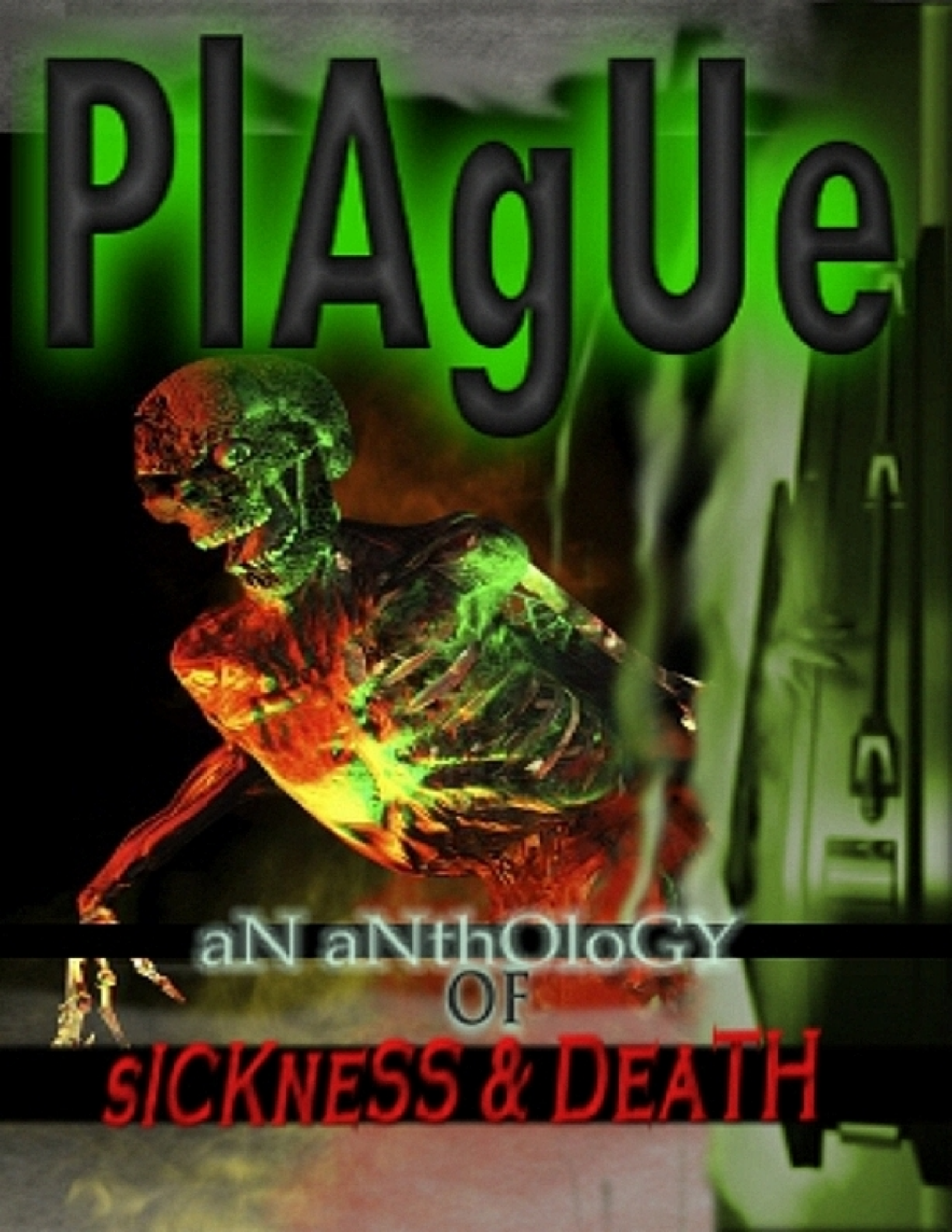

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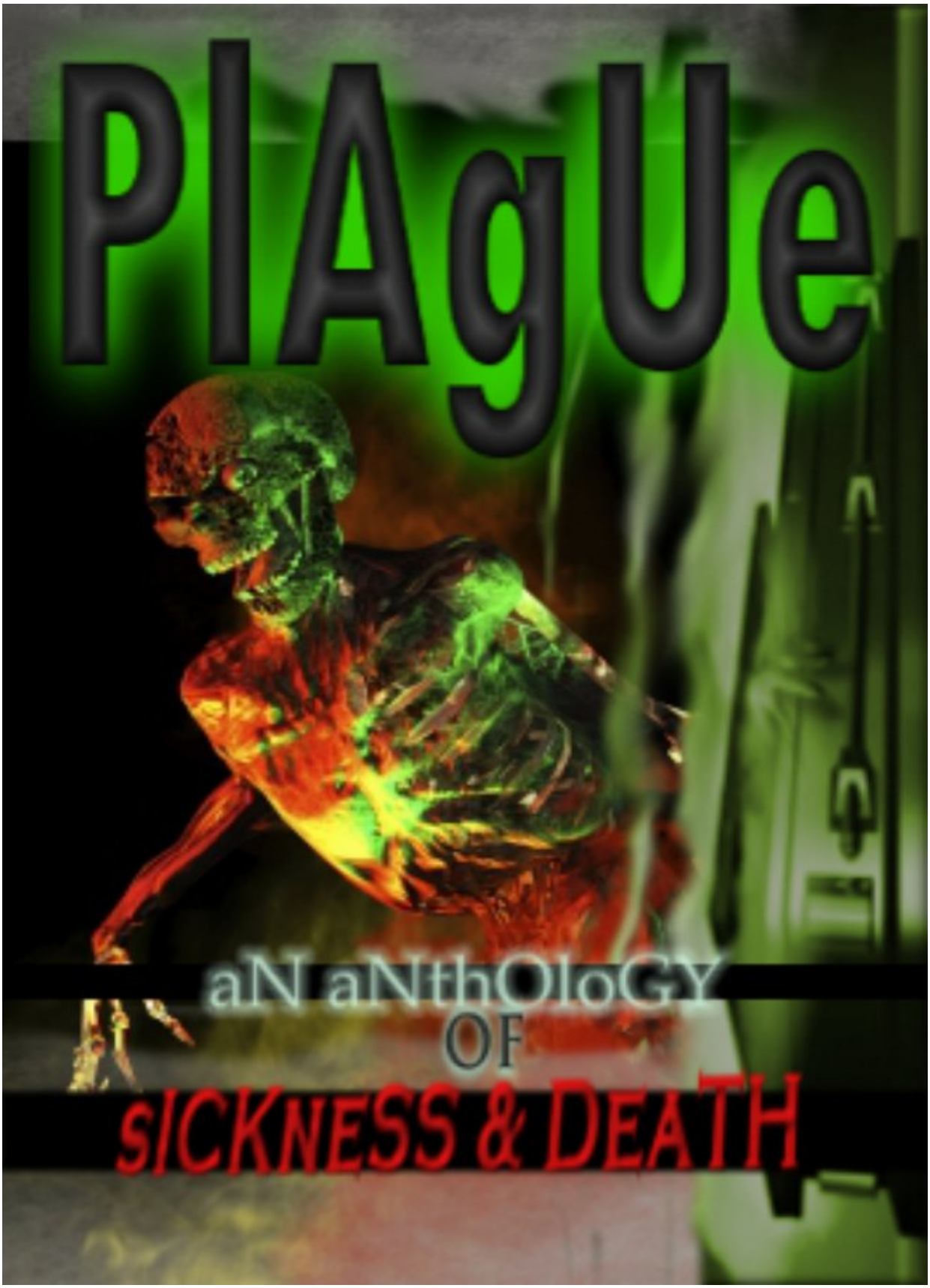
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OF
SICKNESS & DEATH

PLAGUE

An Anthology of Sickness & Death

Edited
By

E.S.Wynn

COVER ART

"Coffin With Hand Coming Out" by Victor Habbick
"Zombie Walking In Fire" by Victor Habbick
"Sars Virus" by dream designs

Image courtesy of FreeDigitalPhotos.net

GRAPHICS

Nathan J.D.L. Rowark

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FOREWORD

A big thank you to all the wonderfully talented authors who have given their time, their effort, and their genius to this horror collection of truly remarkable fiction.
Also, a big thank you to our supporters...

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We hope you enjoy this blood-curdling collection of twisted and terrifying tales, and feel free to check out more titles from Thirteen Press & Horrified Press in the future.

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ABOUT OUR AUTHORS:

Morris

Mark Slade

Morris sat on his favorite branch of the oak tree and watched the gang gather around the newly dead deer that lay on the side of the road. They were quicker than him when it came to fresh food. They flew straighter, almost never catching a wing on a clothesline or even running smack into the middle of a tree. As a gang of buzzards that was more or less his family, they were pretty selfish, never letting Morris anywhere near the fresh dead.

Once, out in the fields, after a huge rain storm had interrupted a fine meal on a possum that died of natural causes, Morris was the first to notice the clouds break apart and he swooped in to take his share of an intestine. But Brutus beat Morris to it.

Brutus didn't have problems landing or eyesight that blurred from time to time. Brutus was second in charge of the gang. Brutus was also very territorial. As soon as Morris landed, Brutus attacked him, pecked Morris in the face, clawed him with a long jagged nail. Morris folded his large black wings about himself and rolled away from Brutus. Brutus would have followed if he hadn't been afraid the others in the gang would have stolen the intestine.

Morris sat on his favorite branch and noticed an idea was brewing in his malfunctioning brain. It took a while for him realize the inkling, which caused him to fidget, dance back and forth on his branch.

The idea was to throw a twig in the middle of the gang as they stripped the flesh from the deer. He had to make sure the twig fell close to where Brutus was. He would fight anything that interrupted his supper. Morris would swoop down and snatch the heart, fly out to the fields and hide as best he could. Ohhh. . . happy days.

Morris snapped a twig that hung overhead with a beak, calmly flew over the gang and dropped it. He flew a few feet more and landed on a tree stump. Morris looked back, sniggered. They were fighting. Brutus was on another rampage. The deer was free, open to anyone. The heart lay in an empty rib cage, the lungs had already been devoured.

Morris had to take a chance.

He took flight. Sailed over the gang once, turned around and landed at the deer's horribly disfigured face. Morris watched Brutus take Goering by the beak and drag him, while Francis tried to sink his dull claws in Brutus back. That really annoyed Brutus. Morris sniggered. He took hold of the deer's heart and broke anything that was attached by ripping it out of the rib cage. Morris was ready to take flight when he heard three screeches that sounded very strange. He looked up, the heart still in his beak. Brutus, Francis and Goering had him surrounded. But that was not what was strange. It was the noises they were now making as they spread their wings. They were growling at him.

Growling?

Buzzards don't growl, Morris thought. They screech, gurgle, make a whole list of indescribable sounds, but not growl.

Their eyes were different. They glowed red. The skin on their faces had dwindled away to show bone and skull. They were drooling from their beaks, and a weird white puss had formed around the sockets of their eyes.

They had changed, indeed.

Oh, shit, Morris thought. Time to fly---

He took flight. In one bound, he leaped, wings spread and the heart of that freshly killed deer in his beak.

A tractor trailer came hurtling down the curvy road, doing eighty and a huge mirror side-swiped Morris.

Morris fell to the pavement. He blanked out momentarily. Darkness had overcome him. He heard sounds that echoed. Those sounds had jolted him back to consciousness. Or was it jarring pain?

When he opened his eyes, he saw that the gang was feasting on his half-paralyzed body. Even though Morris was in immense pain and kept blacking out, he found himself jealous of the gang.

He too wanted a good meal.

When the Contagion Falls Asunder

Lawrence R. Dagstine

The long road to becoming a Uran scientist began in a room filled with over two-dozen corpses. To learn of the human anatomy, and how their immune systems were susceptible to the dust in our planet's air, it was necessary to take their bodies apart. It was necessary to note that their nerves, muscles and organs became liquefied after a contamination period of days rather than weeks. It was necessary to study their brains and their brains' complex patterns, in hopes that our own race could evolve and explain their sudden dissident and aggressive behavior. Yet the vision of twenty-five alien life forms, each on a silver-top hovering slab, was so overwhelming that I almost had to turn back into the warmer part of the corridor.

The long-gowned doctor of progress, Zyrok, stepped forward and comforted me. "You're not going to lose your lunch again today, are you, Durgess?" he asked, blinking his purple eyes and contorting the many wrinkles in his spongelike face.

I held my tongue back and swallowed. "No, I don't think so."

He nodded. "Good."

Still, it was *this*… The invasion of the privacy of death in another species, which was so disturbing. We had to perform an almost infinite amount of autopsies and encamp among these Terrans for several years, which was about how long our geoscientists suggested the winds carried the plague. How could the few that were left ever survive it? How could the Urans survive the constant reminder that it was our world that embraced and killed these people? I grabbed my face. I could not breathe, let alone look upon them, for there were hundreds more underground morgues and domed facilities across the planet which housed their corpses. I closed my eyes, overcome by nausea.

"It's obviously some kind of virus *we* can't catch," Zyrok said. "Something airborne for who knows how long: centuries, millennia, eons." He looked around him. "Bishop Kalesk, horticulturist and probably the most skeptical of all our researchers, had been arrested with a liquid form of the contagion. Megalomaniac. It isn't enough that we're being blamed for genocide. Still, he yielded to the evidence of healings from plantlife, which

could not be explained by any other reason. Only that, when the wind swept the plague onto tree barks, they absorbed it and in turn produced a curative sap. A great variety of Uran illnesses have been cured by the same simple means, and the cures have been effected quickly even in serious illnesses that had resisted medical treatment for a long time. Before he lost his mind though, these facts seemed to Kalesk the sure foundation on which to base the research in which he at last acknowledged the aggressive behavior of the contaminated. Nevertheless, he was jailed. And we have yet to learn what *he* learned, then take over from there. In his brilliantly reasoned texts, the bishop submitted his own judgement to the judgement *our* planet should have taken when the Terran population first succumbed to the outbreak."

"Call night time executions on those exhibiting signs of the virus," I said, thinking long and hard to myself. "But in droves? Now *that's* genocide."

"Perhaps. But this is no ordinary pandemic. It's a microscopic pathogen which seems to grow, attack and destroy once inhaled by these creatures. For pity's sake, they even attacked *us* at times." There was a moment of significant silence. Zyrok could see the expression on my face. "It's not just in the air but also in the blood," he said, pulling me next to him. "The whole colony has been pickled in it. The pathogen awakens a diseased but dormant cell in their bodies, then somehow multiplies. It pumps through the blood to all the major organs, and then, finally, does something to the brain's oxygen levels, thus affecting motor skills and thinking processes. Everything begins to break down. At first, they exhibit signs of fever and their behavior is zombielike. But then, within days or hours, a feral nature manifests itself, and…" He paused and put a webbed hand on my shoulder. "Well, that's what we're here again today to find out."

The morgue droid rechecked our passes and assigned us as a group, and we were given a platform in which to work. Zyrok psychically summoned a medical examination tray over to assist us. Frantically I looked around. Hovering nearest to us was the corpse of a young female who had had her eyes removed. Suspended next to her was a tall dark-skinned male who looked like one of the colony figureheads who first disembarked that great ship many, many moon cycles ago. Never in my wildest dreams would I have thought that one of the most recognizable of their leaders would be among the dead—he had shaken my hand as a sign

of goodwill and peace—and never, I thought, would I be able to touch either of them now.

"We killed them," I muttered, feeling sick once more. "A whole species on the verge of extinction."

"I said stop that." Zyrok put his scalpel aside and waved an angry digit. "Stop blaming yourself and get back to work. You can either stand here and bawl, or you can try and make a difference for the few thousand that are left." He nodded to the rear end of the room. "Why don't we start where it's a little less gory? We've got *him*," he said. "Seems to have expired in his prime."

Him was a light-skinned male, no blotches, all there—thank goodness—young and well-proportioned. His eyes reminded me of some of those middle-aged, well-groomed astronauts that introduced themselves upon landing here. They were blue and green. The hair brown, of course, and, if not slicked back, usually curled off to the side.

As a team, we were required to extract cells and assigned an arm or a leg. Then, using Kalesk's texts to guide us, we'd punch our own findings along the way into a small systemic reader in the side of the floating table.

Zyrok and I drew the right arm. "You want to start off?" he asked.

"No, you begin it. I'll pick up and pass you tools as we go along."

Zyrok began. "Here," he said. "Hold the wrist then."

I gripped my cold and clammy talons around it, then instinctively pulled back.

"What's the matter?"

"I'd rather you hold it yourself," I said.

"You know, you've done this before. You're only holding yourself back. Even students with promise must overcome things of this nature, submit to scientific growth and development. You and I know it is the only path for a Uran."

"Glory can wait for another day, if that's what you mean."

"Bah, you're just squeamish! I've had hundreds of pupils just like you. You possess the genius, but not the fortitude."

"And Kalesk?" I asked.

"He might have been deranged," Zyrok noted, "but he was still an excellent mind. He found his niche and went for it. I wish you'd concentrate more and do the same. I see a greatness in you."

Regardless, I did not touch a single body part that day, nor the rest of that cycle. I refused to. But gradually, as Zyrok and I visited more corpse-laden facilities and searched endlessly for a cure, I began to lose my shyness and do my share. Zyrok was very considerate, as were the other scientists I'd met along the way. I eventually came to enjoy his running sense of humor, which helped us through some dark times, such as when we had to draw samples from still-living specimens. He became my ideal—a researcher of grace and courage and wisdom. His knowledge of the human anatomy was astonishing. The ability to remove and put back nerves, vessels, muscles, bones and other tissue seemed an absolute part of his vocational makeup. And to do it with such precision, especially in those who were violent towards us, showed me just how bold and innovative he was.

"They call that the carotid artery," he'd say during our examinations, showing me one major internal vessel after another, summoning a thin wire-like pair of forceps down from the ceiling above to do work between the neck and ear. The utensils always adhered to his instructions, and always through telepathic communication. A gift only elder Urans possessed. "Oh, by the way, that's the parotid gland. Exquisitely designed, don't you think?"

"Yes," I'd reply, along with the other things he showed me—the lessons never got old—wondering how one could witness the infinite complexity and beauty of the human body and not marvel at the negative effects this plague had upon it.

"Are you ready to examine the brain, Durgess? That's my personal favorite."

And it had become my favorite, too, for the challenge of that first cycle of research was not confined to just speculation over mounds of cadavers. In Uran physiology, it was normal to look for answers by dissecting animals belonging to the other race: dogs, cats, mice, frogs, lizards, even insects. We considered every possible solution and sought every possible clue, all for the sake of a species not our own. We could have given up at any time and watched them wither out of existence. We could have stuck long needles through their heads and ripped open their spinal columns, only to see how the virus would react when the nerves and muscle fibers were exposed for long periods to *our* air. Why, we could have

even gone one step further. We could have performed transplants. But we chose not to.

This work, within *some* living beings, rather than among mostly dead ones, allowed Zyrok and I, and the teams of researchers who helped us, to look at other alternatives. Slowly, through the first, second, and third cycles of my passage to becoming a respectable scientist, I became familiar enough with the aggressive pre-death aspects of the illness to know what to expect. I took Kalesk and Zyrok's findings with me, as if they had been my own. I prepared myself to do what every scientist must eventually do—leap from the known to the unknown and back again.

After much training, I was ready to leave the desert morgues and work with the terminally sick. The provincial hospitals on the darker side of the planet were small—one or two laboratories and operating rooms to each, crumbling architecture and ancient technology for the staff, which included seven assistants. One of the security droids introduced me to the head nurse on duty and soared off. Lying on a nearby gurney was a human female of about fifty, red hair and brown eyes, with the rugged, muscular build of one who had probably carried the immense burdens of her home planet with her. She had been recently infected. Her vinyl suit was ripped in shreds and matted with froth and blood. "Did something bite her?" I asked.

The nurse responded by compressing her eyelids and shaking her porous head; as a female drone, she was voice incapable.

Still, by some miracle, the woman's face had not been torn off. There were claw wounds everywhere else. She had regained consciousness, but was in shock from blood loss. To ease her suffering, we administered plasma injections. I wondered what had happened. Nobody could single-handedly fight off an army of crazed people showing signs of the virus. Not even this tough looking lady.

But she had. Another scientist had told me the story. A dozen or so colonists had been feeding on the intestines and brain matter of her livestock. The moment she came outside to stop them she was attacked, then the hospital's patrol had traced the assault and dispatched a unit. Security droids had smoked them off the farm. "You mean the people in these parts are tagged?" I asked.

"You kidding me? We have to," the scientist said. "The way this thing's become so widespread, they'd not only eat each other up but tear *us*

apart along with them."

"How did you handle the other contaminates?"

"In the end we did the usual, sent in flame tanks, releasing firebombs and igniting them but not bringing them down. With the disease eating away at their insides, the wounded looked like charred remains but still raced away, looking for refuge in the outlands." The scientist looked down at the woman, then faced me again. "By the way, I'm Jingren."

"Durgess."

"Ah, yes, of course. Zyrok's pupil."

"Doctors of progress," I laughed. "That's us."

"Then your academies and domes are aware of the situation."

"The severity of it," I said. "What is the female's name?"

"Her tag says MARY 578. According to the task force that *pre*-taped it—over here, we don't take precautions—she heard her milk distributors *mooing* vulnerably. She went to the door of her living unit just as the aggressors crawled underneath the electric fence sealing off her property. They crept along the shadows and bounded for the farmyard. She barely had time to recognize what was happening before they leaped for the only flesh meal they'd probably had in weeks."

"Do you mind if I examine her?" I asked.

"No, go right ahead."

I approached the gurney, and, the first thing I noticed was the bruising. "She must have fell backwards with one of them on top of her—powerful hands and sharp teeth got her good at the abdomen. She might have held her attacker's throat away from her face while her legs were hooked around his lower body. In murderous embrace, they probably rolled about… Mary here driving her thumbs into her attacker's windpipe—that would explain the missing fingernails and broken digits—while the others, just as hungry, lashed wildly at her from the side. Then she went limp from the pain."

"The droids found her on the grass, unconscious, the contaminates trying to make a break for it."

"See that she is given a room. Make sure she sleeps well, and have her monitored constantly. The first sign of weird or aggressive behavior, have her destroyed."

Jingren nodded and saw the patient to a room. When he returned he said to me, "Never in my life have I seen such a field of human suffering."

“What do you mean?”

“Here. Follow me.”

I was led down a long steel-walled corridor, then, eventually, outside. The courtyard to the hospital was just as old as the main building, filthy and falling apart, surrounded by large barrack-type structures. It was here that they recharged the security robots and housed the humans who were ultra-violent and on their last limb. Jingren parted with me momentarily, promising to return and finish his tour of the grounds. Impatient, and curious of the environment I would be working in, I wandered into one of the sparsely lit halls on the other side, drawn by the strange, muffled, exhausted cries. I had dealt with still-living specimens before, but never anything like this. At that point, I knew, that the *nature* of the virus was worse than any could ever have imagined; not even Zyrok would have been prepared for what my eyes were about to see.

I opened the hatch of a large, high-ceilinged ward filled with small cots that had electric cuffs and iron-barred sides. In each bed was a human child, all less than ten years of age, suffering late stages of plague and other *surreal* deformities. Some lay with backs arched like pulled bows, spasming and drooling blood while clawing at the railings. Others had rotted limbs stretched out stiffly in paroxysmal extension, their faces frozen, and only the eyelids moving normally. A few sat upright, not yet wholly deformed, jumping up and down in their cagelike beds in primitive rhythm; it was as if what remained of their intelligence told them to escape if they could from the horribleness that was soon to *claim* them.

That they were children only seemed to magnify the pain of watching this once great race, the waste of the promise and fulfilment of terrestrial life. Over it all rode the plaintive cries and sobs of my own people, fused into one long, unending wail. The corridors of their hell must echo with such sounds, I thought.

At the rear of the ward were two female Urans soaking up thoughts on what to do this shift—one of them an elder nurse with telepathic capabilities who was making a young Terran girl in white levitate for a medicinal puncture. Hovering behind her was a security droid; it had been placed there as a precaution.

Jingren had returned. “We can’t get too close to them,” he said, startling me. “We must always have magnetic syringes and other nanorythmic devices at the ready. Like the adults they, too, bite.”

“I’ve been performing autopsies on this species for many cycles now,” I said, deeply saddened. “I…I’ve never…”

“Never seen a strain of the virus this bad?” Jingren finished for me. “With the recent increase in malformations, dome leaders now suspect that this whole mess was industrial-based from the beginning, rather than a germ of dust and wind.”

“Listen, I don’t care how smart your leaders are, or how good your technology and security is. This should have been contained sooner!” I reprimanded him. “How could your western tribes allow the outbreak to become so extensive?”

“Lack of intelligent research. Funding, too. The science is there when it wants to be, but the financing, like all other worlds, just isn’t.”

“Have you searched your flora for answers?”

“Sure, on many occasions.”

“Then you *must* have come up with some kind of antibiotic or stabilizer.”

“Ah, you reek of *new* resident,” he laughed, and at first, I could not understand why. “That’s not a bad thing, mind you. But on this side of the planet the virus has entered a more critical stage.” We both watched the nurse psychically put the sedated child back in her cot, then refit the bars and cuffs.

“What are their chances?” I asked.

Jingren shook his head sadly. “We rarely get them early enough. They either die immediately or become confrontational vegetables first.”

On our way out of the ward we stopped to talk to a young boy, who seemed without infection and malformations whatsoever. He was jumping up and down, singing, “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star”, a popular Terran nursery song. He wore a white and blue-striped elastic jumpsuit. And as he bounced about the dimly lit corridor, his eyes seemed to shimmer a ray of light, too. “That’s OSCAR 183,” said Jingren. “He’s the luckiest of the bunch. Personnel were nice enough to let him stay here.”

“More than just lucky,” I said suddenly, kneeling forward and putting out a gloved hand. “A phenomenon! Oh Oscar, I hope you’ll come here.”

“I bet you do,” he replied with snarky laughter.

“Where are your parents?”

“Dead. The plague took them.”

"And of all the little boys and girls on the face of this planet, the plague never bothered you?"

"Nope." He flexed his tiny muscles for me. "I'm *invincible*!"

"I'm sure you are," I said, staring up at Jingren. The staff scientist began thinking the same thing that I was. Only *he* wished the thought had come to his hospital many cycles sooner. Where research into human anatomy and plantlife was too often regarded, and ultimately failed, here was this amazing child with the word HOPE written all over his face in big letters. His body makeup *must* have been different from all the rest.

"So you think there's something about Oscar we don't know about?" Jingren asked. "Something we've overlooked?"

"Of course. Look at him," I said. "Not a single sign of virus in him, and it doesn't seem as though he'll be exhibiting any symptoms soon. We need to build a sterile environment, and we need to extract right away."

"But the boy is still alive. To perform medical examinations of that magnitude on a living subject is not only sinister but—but— Well, it's *unethical*."

"Zyrok and I conducted such tests on still-living specimens thousands of times. I am already experienced in the area. Remember, I had one of the best teachers. He even taught me how to overcome sickness and other obstacles."

"Yes, I understand that. But the boy would have to be subjected to postmortem stasis, and there's no guarantee we could bring him back."

"You underestimate the medical and scientific perfection of our race."

"Still, that isn't the way our tribes handle experimentation detail," he argued. "We have our own laws, our own moral codes." He looked worried. "Think of the controversy."

"Think of the *benefits*," I said, trying to convince him once more. "Think of the positive rather than the negative. Or would you rather sit back and watch what could very well be the death of all humanity?"

He did not answer. After all, how could he?

He knew I was right. If a brutal medical procedure was required to save the lives of thousands, then so be it. It had to be done.

In the right atmosphere, with the right tools—and this included the immediate quarantine and constant presence of five-year-old Oscar—I sought a cure to the viral nightmare around us. I had four other wards in

which to extract. Jingren always made sure permission was granted; given the laws of the western tribes, this also provided a challenge. In the malformation cases, he and I occasionally removed nerves and muscle fibers rather than whole organs, and experimented with what could be had. However, my real interest was in what was already missing, and this had stemmed from that one ward which overflowed with the plague's tinier victims.

When we had successfully done fifty examinations, experimenting on the half-turned or already deceased, each case increasing in complexity and duration as technology and team became more coordinated, I was ready to accept the risk of anaesthetizing Oscar and putting *his* body on that slab for the first time. Yet before this could happen, I had an appointment with one of life's crueler events—the death of a teacher.

Early one morning in the sterilized chamber that had been prepared for me, word had come of Zyrok's passing. "If you want to see the body before Morgue Law goes into effect, you must leave immediately. There's not much time."

I looked down at Oscar's naked form on the slab, as one of the nurses was putting him under. "Count backwards from ten, child," I said, tapping his hand. "Everything will be all right." Facing forward again, I answered, "Tell my tribe I'm not coming. Tell them to honor the body without me."

Jingren pulled me aside. "Are you sure about this? He would have wanted you there."

"He would have also wanted me *here*," I said.

Doubt was my oldest enemy. I knew it well. Yet with the thoughts of Zyrok's passing filling my mind, I had never expected it to arrive with such force at this crucial point. For the first time I was aware that we were actually going to perform an autopsy-like medical procedure involving an unacceptable science. The plan was to get what we needed and get out of there, then resurrect the boy. Or at the very least catch him in Near Death Mode. Instead of looking for the cause of death we were now looking for the cause of *life*… And in this, hopefully, we would find the cure.

Jingren, who would be on my team collecting what we needed from the boy's temporarily oxygenless body, wanted to make sure of the timing. "We'll get the child ready for telepathic resuscitation, in case his organs start to fail before us. We won't open him up until you say—okay?"

"Yes," I said. "Then you come in and excise the essentials."

“Don’t you want to do it?”

“No. If I do it alone, you’ll never be able to follow me. You’d better know it from the beginning, and watching each other’s movements and taking turns will help in case something goes wrong.”

There was anxious silence as the team surrounded the slab.

Finally, Jingren and I drew the right arm. “Do you want to start?” I asked.

“No, you begin. I’ll pick up and pass you tools as we go along.”

I began. “Here,” I said. “Hold the wrist then.”

Jingren gripped his webbed talons around it, then nervously pulled back.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’d rather you hold it,” he said.

“You know, you’ve performed medical procedures before. Maybe not on this scale, but you’ve contributed your share. I’ve heard even students must overcome things of this nature, submit to scientific growth and development. Otherwise, you do yourself a grave disservice.”

Once we had extracted what we needed, I passed the cellular snipings on to two nurses, who were at the ready holding trays. “Take these to the laboratory straight away. The boy won’t hold on much longer. We have but a few minutes to let Oscar’s samples intermingle with the other infected ones we’ve collected from the ward.”

I felt a chill, thinking, Oh no, everything’s going to go wrong somehow. Any other impressions as to what would happen next rested on how much time we actually had.

Still, time would not be enough.

This was to be Oscar’s last dawn, and the last one for that incredible young mind as well. Attempts at maintaining the stasis had failed. From birth, my life had built toward one moment: examining and perfecting the anatomical imperfections of other races, and a scientist was born. My life had found its meaning there, nowhere else, and now in the dying of this one untainted life was my own death, too. My vocational makeup did not matter anymore. At least, not to me.

“We were working on very little time,” Jingren reminded me afterwards.

“We crashed because of my mistakes,” I said. “I pushed too hard.”

“We were working in the dark, Durgess, feeling our way across. We’ll know more next time.”

“I don’t know if there’ll be a next time. We’re still in the dark, Jingren, and I’ve become afraid of it once more.”

“Your confidence will come back as you work. You have to try again. You have no choice.”

I could take no more and hurriedly left the chamber. Finally alone, I could no longer contain my overwhelming sadness and began to weep at the terrible tragedy of that young boy, so alive and ready to live, to grow up and experience our culture and way of life, to be surrounded by us… Unable to bring him back.

Where was their god when all this happened? Where was their god when they first became infected? If there was a reason for this, what was it? Leaving the hospital I had no answer for any of it. Overcome with grief, I went for a walk into the wastelands alone. Hospital staff wanted to follow and comfort me, but I was beyond approach. I wept for Oscar, and I wept for myself. I wept at how I had failed all those who wanted more from me than I could ever give them. There was no answer that I knew—there had to be one, of course, somewhere; I was sure I would find it if I went on long enough—so I wept alone. And I knew that, as painful as it was, for now, I must return to those wards.

When I arrived back at the hospital, I saw Jingren talking with one of the other scientists. His expression was one of elation. “What’s going on?” I asked, curious.

He rushed over. “It’s remarkable, Durgess. It’s absolutely remarkable!” He forwarded me a smile. “When Oscar’s samples were combined with those of the children and adults in the other wards, a metamorphosis occurred. It wasn’t a complete transition, mind you. But it’s a start.”

“What? Well go on, tell me.”

“We’ve won a seventy-five percent victory,” he answered gleefully. “Now we must replicate those tissue samples and cells, strengthen them, and fight for the other twenty-five percent.”

Surprised, I looked from Jingren to the other faces that had been part of my team. Each one nodded, or in some way said to me: “Well done, Durgess.”

At that moment I had my answer and I began to build hope again. The first attempts, with all their pain and sorrow, had been leading up to this very second. I knew if I turned back now, I'd only deny Oscar a meaningful sacrifice and a rightful place as hero to his people, as well as my own chance for complete medical triumph.

An Autumn Morning in Messina, 1347

Mathias Jansson

From the dark alley of death
I can hear the soft damp sound of flesh
dragged along the pavement
the blood smeared wheels
crushing bones and skulls
on its way through the silent town

Two black horses
starved as a sack of bone
pull the heavy wagon
filled with rotten corpses
dangling black legs and arms
a creeping crawling stinking
pile of flies and maggots

Bring out the dead!
Bring out the dead!
his dark voice echoes as thunder
against the barred houses

Red eyes are burning
his skeleton grin glimmering
under the black hood
white knuckles
hold the worn reins
guiding the wagon
through the old harbor of Messina

Behind the wagon
a black flood of rats

casting its shadow
over the light of dawn
moist noses sniff
the smell of death
in the cool morning air.

Desire, Violent and Protracted

Dave Fragments

Subject Ten succumbed to the virus early this morning. Its fingertips were bloody, body hair smeared with its fluids, eyes black and bleeding, our tenth failure. I did the post mortem and prepared the body for disposal.

"Death delayed but not prevented," Professor Morgenteil sighed the words in his thick accent as he read my report. "The effect of the virus seems to build. Initial day they're ecstatic. The second day, the frenzy starts and the death spiral follows."

"The most arrogant and mendacious moment of history is mankind's invention of knowing." I quoted the Professor's philosopher. He laughed.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. Take the body for incineration. Obtain a new subject. I have another mutated variant ready. We're narrowing in on the variant that stops aging. The plague variants must stimulate the proper body cycles so man will not die."

"Could your choice of virus be species specific?" I asked. He gave me an ugly stare. In these moments, I knew to go about my business and let the Professor have the last word.

"Ach, nein. But these troglodytes are frail und unreasoning. I worry that the cure requires reason."

How fateful those words were.

I spent the rest of the day driving to a dump three towns away, paying the owner to turn his back while I incinerated Subject Ten. The dump owner was weak-willed, greedy, and corrupt; a man to be used while we created the Professor's new order. He didn't see me burn my own clothing and wash with germicidal soap three times fully naked in the junkyard. He wouldn't care if I jumped into the fire to burn as long as I paid him to dispose of my ashes in advance.

Not far from that dump, a local animal shelter specialized in rescuing primates from bad homes and research laboratories. This shelter put on a good front for animal activists, even those with "misbehaving" Pan Troglodytes. I purchased Number Eleven--a young, virile chimp, too wild to be socialized. Back at the lab, I patted its head, let it hump my leg to inoculate it with the newly modified viral combo, and locked it in the

isolation chamber. Perhaps Morgenteil's mutant variations would boost its immune system and prevent its death. That was my own self-deceptive rationalization; like a moralist or philosopher, I could justify the death for a cure while selling my soul.

Since this was a day to forget, I went to Little Dick's Tavern, a local bar, for beer and tequila to silence my conscience.

Taggert the Braggart and Timmy One Ball started their weekly argument. I knew both brutes and the owner, Little Dick. He said if fighting's in your blood then take it to the basement. I ventured to the basement to win a twenty or two. Tim brawled. Taggert boxed. These night time fisticuffs were old-fashioned, bare-chested, no-style, and no-finesse, beat-the-crap-out-of-each-other matches.

Hearing the smack of fists on flesh, my long youthful ambition to be champion of the world died slower. The cheers of the crowd let me imagine victories, let my heart beat faster, blood run hotter, mind grow numb, and conscience ease. Little Dick's fights only had one victor--a bruised and bloody Taggert raised his fist in triumph. Timmy One Ball required surgery on his broken jaw. My adolescent, guilt-ridden bloodlust obliterated my self-hate. Drunk and buzzed, I followed curbs and walls to my apartment where I fell on my bed and slept.

The next morning I drowned my hangover in caffeine, aspirin, and sugar. Inside the laboratory, I smelled death. Today was yesterday repeated. Number Eleven whimpered, cyanotic pallor, eyes staring upward, near death. Its hands and manhood raw and bleeding, its body covered in pus-oozing sores. I put on a HAZMAT suit, prepared an overdose of morphine, and waited for the Professor to give the word.

"That was not the proper genetic modification. Tomorrow's subject will fare better." The arrogant Kraut was cocksure of himself. Animals and lab assistants were his inferiors.

"Too soon! There'll be questions if I use our regular suppliers."

"So don't."

"There's only one more source for healthy chimps. The mobsters."

"That's why I pay you a big stipend to keep your sins secret. I own you. Isn't that how der young friends say it? Strength is the manner of men and this animal had no will to live. That's why today's subject died so schnell. There's always reason in madness. Tomorrow brings success. Without a doubt I want a new one by tomorrow. Ist Gut?"

He handed me an inoculation kit. It contained two doses like always. I had an alternative to taking his money--starvation or suicide. No other laboratory would hire me. Suicide isn't my way. I put the kit in my pocket and spent this day like the previous Eleven. It was a different garbage dump, the same fire and shower, a different farm run by seedy thugs, and a new chimp. The same get friendly with it and infect it in the laboratory routine. Morgenteil once said, evil is the root of all money. First get money, then get power, and then buy a woman or an alcoholic substitute. He was twisted. I was tired and exhausted. Another night at Little Dick's to blot out my deeds. Money can't buy a clean conscience but I was that worm in the tequila, completely immersed in denial.

I drank alone until Taggert arrived with a new stinking pack of bullies and hanger-ons. The fool glad-handed me on the shoulder and breathed ugly into my face. I could smell the uncleanness of his last bathroom visit on his hands. I was pissed off at the world and at this moment, Taggert was the world. I shoved him away.

"You got a problem tonight college BOY?"

"Nothing soap and water won't cure." I flipped a quarter into the air. "Buy yourself a bar of soap and get lost. Otherwise, blow me," I said. He swung. I ducked, twisted under his roundhouse, and jabbed into his ribs. He roared. We circled. Fists raised. Little Dick smacked the bar with an aluminum bat.

"Take it downstairs," he yelled.

The night's entertainment was on. The smell of old blood, new sweat, spent beer, and musk filled the basement. A couple frat boys volunteered as my seconds. I stripped to the waist, emptied my pockets, and faced Taggert. I wasn't too drunk to take stock of an opponent. He was more muscle than beer gut. I was always more brain than brawn.

"I'm going to enjoy beating you bloody, Spudfucker," he said.

"At least I don't suck dick," I said, hoping to get him angry. He swung outside. I blocked and jabbed his face twice making blood spurt from his nose. He roared and charged. I danced to his left and his right-hook found only air where I stood. He came back with a left uppercut that I batted away and tripped him. His face smacked the concrete. I stepped back, waited for him to get back on his feet.

He battered me again, smashing my face into the wall and splitting my lip. I stomped his foot. He howled like a dog. I took the opportunity to place

two right jabs to his liver. He folded like a shirt from a cheap laundry without no starch. I pummelled him until his legs went rubbery. His seconds caught him before his knees hit the ground and slapped him alert.

Now the fight turned real. We boxed--sweating, punching, weaving, landing blows but unable to gain greater advantage than blackening eyes and bruising the other's fists. Our breathing came rough and labored like two steam engines contending on parallel tracks. I grew tired, got careless, and swung wild. My fist glanced off his sweaty face. He landed a right to my jaw. I landed on my ass. He stomped my crotch. I puked on the floor, curled into a ball and rolled away.

Taggert picked up the inoculation kit and opened it. Self-preservation cured the pain in my testicles. I leaped to take the inoculator away from him. He stabbed it at me. I grabbed his hand, bent it backwards. We grappled like wrestlers; his mind inflamed by booze and hate, my mind panicked over fear of infection. We fell. The inoculator cut his chest. It sprayed virus on both of us. Show over. Damn the fates of men and supermen. The crowd of inebriates gasped and went silent. They didn't know it but we were their evening's blood sport, a pair of gladiators, slaves with hard fists and red blood, sacrifices to the god of stupidity.

I landed a right uppercut on Taggert's jaw and caught him as he collapsed. Drunk, half-beaten and aching, our only salvation was my laboratory. I deserved to die for not leaving the inoculator in the lab. He deserved it for his churlishness and jackassery. We were two men guilty of illogic and ego, fighters on a sea of dumb. I collected my wallet and the inoculator. I tossed a wad of money from inside my shorts to Little Dick. It contained enough cash for a week's worth of booze for this crowd.

"I have to take him back to the lab." His buddies objected but let me lift him onto my shoulder. The thousand-yard walk across the campus in the cool night air would sober me and let me find an explanation. Remorse doesn't sit well with me. Remorse is for weaklings the Professor would say.

In the laboratory, the new chimp woke but didn't call out as I passed its cage with Taggert on my shoulder. I dropped him on a steel examination table and fastened the straps. He might be unconscious but when the alcohol evaporated, he would thrash and fight. I cut his clothes from his body, stripped my clothing, and dropped them in the bio-waste bin. Everything was contaminated. I washed both our bodies with disinfectants, dried with

hot air, dressed our cuts and bruises, wrapped Taggert and myself in space blankets, and fell asleep on a bench.

Professor Morgenteil shook my shoulder to get me awake. His eyes moved from my bare torso to Taggert's body and back.

"Explain!"

"A bar fight. Taggert got hold of an inoculator and infected both of us." I held up the broken inoculating needle.

"Weak man. I warned you not to drink so much. You fight with a derelict and you want my approval? You'll both share the fate of life or death. That much was known from your birth." His lack of compassion surprised me.

"Do you have a counteragent?"

"Nein. Only your desire to live. It is unfortunate but there is no sense in not maintaining our experimental program. Get yourself and Mister Taggert into the large isolation chamber and monitor the effects of the virus. If you die, I will bury you. Live and you will be gods or demons for this act."

"What do I tell him when he wakes?"

Morgenteil laughed at my distress.

"Be his comfort, his angel, his god, and create a devotional for him to believe." I watched him leave.

"Who will comfort me?" I said to the chimp. It didn't answer. I phoned an undergrad that I trusted and had him bring clothes and Chinese take-out. Taggert moaned. I moved him into the large isolator. Locked us inside and waited.

Hours later, he woke, struggled against the straps, and unleashed a blue cloud of cursing at the ape and me. It lasted for the better part of an hour.

"What the hell's going on?" he asked, suddenly coherent, examining his bandaged hands and assorted bruises. No sense in sugarcoating my answer.

"That vial you broke contained an experimental virus. It contaminated both of us. I brought you here."

"I remember the fight. That virus must be somethin' special for you to fix me up like this."

"We're trying to stop aging. We usually use chimpanzees for testing." I shrugged. He laughed and wrapped the space blanket like a toga. He

reminded me of an old Roman statue, not altogether fit but still master of all he surveyed.

"Stop aging? Your minkey's been stuffing his face and crappin' and whackin', pulling hair out his body. He's not going to make it."

"Same as the other monkeys."

"Other minkeys?"

"The dead ones." I didn't bother to hide the knowledge of what was to come.

"The virus going kill us?"

"I hope not." I cast a slim hope to a drowning man. I expected to die in a few days.

"Hell of a cure for anything, death."

"I need to monitor your vitals. Nurse Nancy-like." Truth was that I didn't need to do anything but the work would distract me. I picked up an infrared thermometer, aimed it into his ear and took his temperature. It was up. I did mine and it was the same. His heart rate monitor showed an elevated rate. Mine did too. No doubt that we were infected. At least the chimp wasn't covered in sores and picking scabs, yet. That thrill would happen tomorrow.

"Ain't nothing Nancy 'bout you. I picked a fight and you beat me fair and square. I stuck myself like a drunken fool. My bad."

"Just another day at the lab." I shrugged. He put a hand on my shoulder to reassure me.

"Ain't no one beat me in years. Only good things are life, booze, boxing, and winning. Lately, I've been thinkin' boozing ain't so good. You got me three out of four. If we die, we die equals, brothers. Who learned you to box?"

I had no words to answer. The chimp chattered out an orgasm so vicious that he nearly pulled his testicles from his body.

"Hey buddy, don't wear it raw!" Taggert yelled at the chimp. I was glad for the distraction. The chimp defecated and threw it at our enclosure. "Now that wasn't nice. Is that a side effect of the drug or are they all that, uh, friendly?" Taggert asked, staring at the brown splatter on the floor.

"My Dad used to say that monkey throw shit at you three days before you die," I joked. We laughed.

"My Dad never told me nothing. He died in childbirth. Mom's husband shot him when I came out wrong," he said. I didn't laugh. Taggert

continued as if it was important for me to know all about his life. “I was raised by over-the-hill prizefighters and bodybuilders with ‘roid poisoning at a gym.” I looked at him puzzled. “That’s where I got learned boxing,” he thought that explained it all. Perhaps it did. Time has a way to make things interesting. No man knows himself.

I shivered. The lab wasn’t cold but I was hot, feverish. I got out the portable heaters.

“A cowboy nicknamed Punchy at my Aunt’s ranch taught me how to fight and win in the ring and on the streets.”

“That all?”

“Punchy taught me what a man could do with his body. Life is a labyrinth where we forge our fate in muscle with jabs and hooks and raised fists. Where we conquer the obstacles life throws in our path. That’s where I got lost. Not at the goal but on the path. I set out to gain money, fame, and fortune and found Professor Morgenteil.”

I didn’t say that this crossing of paths wasn’t a choice but a punishment. It was a dead end, leading to death and damnation. Taggert had his path less taken, a path to wander. I had Morgenteil.

I threw a deck of cards to Taggert and he played solitaire while I did my lab chores, corrected student papers, and prepared the following week’s synopsis for mine and the professor’s classes. A full day’s work while the chimp dissipated itself in lust and a hard and certain death. Taggert grew restless, horny. I felt the same bodily urges, visions and flashes about flesh pressed against me with blood spurting from severed limbs, bleeding orifices, empty hearts beating as my lips drank blood from it. I imagined specters, shadowlike wraiths, nightmarish hallucinations, lights flashed, colors blended. It all became red, violent sanguine when it filled my mind.

When the chimpanzee died, gasping and gargling its own blood, my senses went wild. The Professor’s lectures of man and uber-man filled my head. I heard the thoughts of the dying ape; saw the blackness of death, shivered in its presence. In my aberrant thoughts life became only blood. The chimps did not command but followed. They suffered each other to live and easily died when they did not serve a superior being. Baffling. Man doesn’t kill without purpose. He kills to gain power.

I cursed the ape aloud and realized that I wasn’t alone. Taggert sat, staring. I looked into his eyes and we knew the truth. We shared the

knowledge, understood our desires. We were blood brothers of the fist, sharers of dread knowledge of our superiority.

"Your minkey is dead," Taggert said.

"We're alive."

"We will not die. I--" he paused. I wondered if the words he was about to speak might not damn us both to burn in eternal hellfire. "--hunger for blood."

I did too.

"The victory of fists might be sufficient for lesser men but not us. Only blood will satisfy our needs," I said. We knew what we'd become. Both of our bodies demanded blood. Bloodlust filled our minds. A death sentence for Professor Morgenteil.

"Our creator will come soon," I said.

"The virus he used demands blood," Taggert said.

The Professor did indeed arrive, dressed in his usual black suit with silver lightning bolts embroidered so nice and pretty. He thought himself a panther, leading a new race of men. His arrogant struggles were written not in a polemic or broadsheet but in his bearing, a man with a cleft chin and heavy boot who saw no wrong in medical experimentation. We drank Morgenteil's blood to satisfy our new appetites.

Taggert and I are the champions of hidden, surreptitious bare-knuckle fights. We pick the best, choose the strong, and beat them in some basement or stockyard or alley. Each of our opponents adores the feel of fist on flesh, the jabs, the hooks, the smell of determination, and the adrenalin. We make them feel like gods of the arena, men of wonder, spawn of the mighty, and then deliver the hammer blow that lays them on the canvas.

In those few precious minutes, they come alive and become glorious in ways most men will never understand. They embrace life in the blood that roars through their bodies, whispers to their souls and then after, we drink their blood and take their lives. While lesser men surrender to soft lives, we elevate the winners. They follow us without regret or despair to our private orgies of blood. The dark night of their souls open their minds to a sanguine fate through our rose-red lips and stained hands.

In death, they thank us for the moments of immortality when they come vis-à-vis with death and conquer it. They thank us for our fists of steel. With mighty jabs, we break the bonds of the mundane. Taggert and I are the forerunners of the ubermensch, a new race, surpassing all who came

before. In mere days we will unleash our virus on the world and the weak will be slaves to our darkest desires, violent and protracted for time without end.

Will Work For Food

Doug Rinaldi

As usual, I had volunteered for the next round of mercy sprees despite having just returned from a successful stint out in the field. Since I had nothing else really going on in my life and had gotten quite good at putting these poor souls out of their misery, I felt it my civic duty to protect and serve.

Mercy sprees. What a load of shit. If these beings or creatures or whatever you feel comfortable calling them actually suffered or felt pain we didn't rightly know, but for all intents and purposes, whether spoken aloud or not, these mercy sprees were more for our own sanity and survival than for our need to emancipate the stricken by dispatching them to the afterlife.

No one quite knew how or why it had all started. With so many randomly idiotic theories floating around out there it made it next to impossible to make sense of anything anymore. One day everything's all dandelions and chocolate cake, the next we were fighting for our lives against twisted versions of our former selves. If this whole situation had just been some ludicrous story spun by some deranged mind in the pages of science fiction, it would've been easier to swallow and, perhaps, somewhat enjoyable. But it wasn't; it was our new reality.

Those afflicted showed no sign of contagion but succumbed to an undying need to grow unkempt beards, wear filthy second- and third-hand clothes, and roam the cities searching for work. I must admit, though, it took a while for me to get used to seeing women and young kids sporting more facial hair than I could grow in a lifetime. Daily, hordes of these grimy perversions of humanity ventured the landscape shouting out greetings like "ho, boy!" to one another while others would hold up makeshift signs scrawled with things like "Homeward Bound" or "Hoboken or Bust."

We determined that under the cover of darkness was the best time for attack since the hobos (as I affectionately referred to them) slept deeply on park benches, under bridges, or in boxcars. Cities, now derelict and overrun by filth, had become very difficult to traverse by night but worse by day. Despite the infected's apparent desire to find work, they did no such thing.

Not one mindless hand had ever been lifted to keep the cities clean. I always chuckled at the irony.

Science and medicine proved useless against the outbreak of the normal man turned hobo. The only thing that was for certain . . . if one of the affected muttered the phrase "will work for food" all those in earshot would immediately begin changing despite their social position or any affluence attained throughout their life. You could be the richest man alive, but doomed you would be if unlucky enough to hear those damning words . . . as so many were before we had any clue what the fuck was happening.

Masses of hobos littered the streets of every municipality shouting out their mantra to those cursed with ears. It had gotten to the point where those still unaffected in the hardest hit areas and without access to hearing protection, in order to survive, had punctured their own eardrums to deafen themselves from the voices. A little drastic sounding, I know. But, I suppose, people in panic mode with limited options tend to do radical and severe things in an effort to survive.

Thankfully, a year or so after the outbreak, a suit had finally been developed by the government eggheads to prevent the plague from spreading needlessly to the rest of the populous. Unfortunate were those, however, who had already taken matters into their own hands and now lived in a deathly silent world.

The suit, made up of a damage-resistant polymer, acted like a shell preventing injury to the wearer while out on patrol or on a mercy spree. Atop the suit, a helmet, similar in a sense to a motorcycle helmet, contained state-of-the-art noise-canceling technology to block out the droning homeless mobs. With two-way radio capabilities built in, personnel could readily communicate with each other and not worry about hearing the infernal phrase. Surprisingly enough, our ignorant and corrupt government, in a grand gesture of decency previously not thought capable, made readily available a noncombat-ready helmet so the civilian population could help defend themselves.

Tonight we planned to venture into a red-zone. We had gotten reports that a hobo hive inhabited an old rail yard. All five of us armed ourselves and suited up, ready for what we all hoped would be a swift and productive mercy spree. Travelling in small numbers made it easier to invade and retreat almost unnoticed. I hated the standard issue helmet with a passion, though; it screwed with my peripheral vision and my claustrophobia

something fierce. Instead, I wore my custom made headset complete with two-way communicator which afforded me better dexterity and line of site in the field. Despite the complaints from my team-leader to wear the government authorized helmet, it always worked better for me. Hubris notwithstanding, I was good at my job and my methods got results. When reminded of those facts he would do his usual grumble and walk away knowing that I was right.

We closed in on the rail yard in tight formation. A myriad of broken down boxcars sat teeming with the affected. I had that sinking 'in over our heads' feeling and my instincts rarely steered me wrong. Five soldiers wouldn't be enough to quell an uprising or an ambush. All we had was the darkness and their slumber on our side. The team-leader gave his orders; we were to each take one boxcar, spray our mercy via napalm, and then move on to the next. I know what you're probably thinking, spraying napalm on people seems a little extreme. Alright, a lot extreme. But they were now the enemy and we had no cure. Again, people do radical and severe things to survive.

I marched out to the farthest boxcar with my flamethrower at the ready. The closer I got the more unbearable the stench of body odor became to the point where I wished I actually had worn the helmet after all. I stood in the boxcar's opening staring awestruck at the snoring and stinking mass of huddling hobos.

Click.

My flamethrower refused to come to life. I pulled the trigger rapidly but to no avail. Snores turned to moans as the noise I made roused them from sleep. I cursed my luck as I dumbly stood there studying my weapon and failing to notice or hear them rising and lumbering toward me. One of them ripped the flamethrower out of my hands as the rest attempted to violate my personal space rule. They grunted and groaned, repeating their chant, but thankfully I could only see their bearded faces mouth the words. Funny and terrifying all at the same time!

I stumbled backwards out of the boxcar, but as I turned to run, a fingerless gloved hand tore away my modified headset. At that point, I *really* wished I had worn the full helmet. Immediately, I covered my ears and started screaming louder and louder until my throat burned raw. My eyes felt like they might bulge out of my skull from the pressure I placed over my ears. In my attempt to retreat, brilliant blazes of napalm ignited the

rail yard as my team ran frantically around screaming and on fire. Was there an accident? Did someone tamper with the flamethrowers? But how and why? Why send us out to die?

Like a madman, I continued to yell as I pressed on my ears until they felt ready to burst. My head bounced as my pulsing heartbeat rocked like a piston through my veins. Behind me, the hobos shouted and gave chase. "Will work for food," over and over. I tripped on a stray railroad tie and tumbled hard to the ground. Who knew that these things could move so fast? They took advantage of my misstep and instantly piled on top of me. As they grabbed and clawed, I fought to remain upright and deaf to their words.

I knew the end drew near as my strength and resolve weakened. In their multitudes, their collective muttering proved too loud for my hands to silence. I felt my conscious mind slipping away as my defensive shouts of nonsense became more cohesive with every second until all I wanted to do was find work so I could have some food.

An Old Enemy On New Lands

Matthew Wilson

Columbus jumped off the boat first, not wishing to appear afraid. He cursed as he soaked his robes and kicked uselessly at a small scurrying crab limping toward the dark safety of its home beneath the wet sand.

Where was his welcoming party?

The West Indies were old news. He'd discovered them years before and for the sake of scurvy and diminishing food supplies, he'd allowed most of his men to remain here last time to make something of a village.

Grow their crops and trade with the locals while Columbus returned home and powered by this promising start would return with more funding from his king, with which he'd build upon the basic foundations his men had started here.

Soon, his country men would spread across this great nation and make it completely theirs. From a small beginning Columbus expected great things.

So where was everybody?

"Vega!" Columbus yelled.

Damn the fellow, the old deck hand was known for his drinking, but he'd been so reliable since he'd cleaned up his act. Vowed to take on his role as mayor of the village. Columbus just hoped he hadn't fallen off the wagon.

"Men, bring your rifles," he moaned. "If that fool, Vega has gotten into trouble with the locals I don't want to join him in their prisons."

Sighing, Columbus shook his clothes still reeking of salt and dragged his feet up toward the grass some distance away. The sand was still wet and slick as mud, but he took his time. The men had been angry for lack of water, had threatened to turn back many times through fear of dragons. It would do no him no favours to fall flat on his face and look weak now.

Sailors were a superstitious lot and might mistake it for a sign to turn back.

Cowards ran home to mother. Columbus wished to make his name.

"Vega! You drunken ass, wake up."

Columbus had only been two weeks out of his expected return date, but the king had originally hesitated when he'd only bought back strange plants and angry slaves. Where was the gold?

Bless the Queens heart, she must have seen something in the explorer, some desire to make a new world his own. She had spoken in the kings ear, and finally, he relented.

"Captain," someone yelled and Columbus changed direction. Why would the sailor be pointing to the well?

Columbus had made it clear from his last time here that none of Vegas men must drink from it, if the natives feared it as a cursed place, then Columbus would not let his dog drink it.

He'd given Vega direct orders.

"Don't tell me," Columbus seethed, "don't you bloody tell me!"

He looked down. The well was nearly empty.

Drained.

"I told him to stay away from this poison. Vega! What have you done to my men?" Columbus listened, but from behind the wooden wall there was nothing but the dull tweet of birds.

"Find him," Columbus said, "If he's dead drunk, throw him in the sea and fetch him to me. If he's dead, then all the better for him."

He would not let his moment in the sun slip away, there were so many villages to build Strengthen to towns, cities, empires all of which he would name after his glorious self. He would better the king who lacked faith in him. Show him what a kingdom truly was.

If Vega hadn't ruined it.

"Where's the crops?" Columbus moaned to himself when he lost a shoe in the sand and stepped onto the grass. Most of it was dead, uncared for. There seemed nothing grown here. Nothing good.

"Sir!" Someone shouted and Columbus felt his heart release its tight pinch. "Thank heavens, where is he?"

The soldier said nothing as Columbus passed him. It took some pushing to open the door for bodies were stacked waist thick behind it. Many bodies moved, devoured the ones with stumps, unable to defend themselves. Writhing over each other, yellow teeth clicking like crab pincers, caked in blood and body fluids like a serpents orgy in their desire to reach close by flesh.

For a moment, Columbus watched, recognised a necklace round the body of one creature as one he'd given to Vega. There seemed little remaining of the old drunk but the inside turned out of his guts for identification.

Columbus struck a man who crossed himself.

"God isn't here, fool. Get back to the ship."

"But, sir-"

Columbus broke away at a quick pace, storming back toward the boat.

Damn Vega, damn him.

"Get in the boat," he told the men waiting on the beach.

"But sir, the village-"

"There is no village here, there never was."

The men waited, trying to process their captains word, but the walls still stood there. It was no imagination bought on by the heat.

"But Vega-"

"There was no one in my employment called Vega," Columbus corrected, he'd not be the one who told the king he'd murdered over one hundred men. Not if he wanted more money for a great empire. He would tell them the natives had taken them into the forests and slaughtered them like animals. "There never was."

The king would reign down his vengeance on these people.

But better them than him.

"Get back in the ship, or I'll leave you here," Columbus said tersely, which did the job. The men snapped awake and fearful of being left alone with the screams across the hill, they ran back, stumbled in a panic into the salty brine, clambering into the boat. Many left their weapons behind.

"Oarsman, signal the ship from here. Tell them to fire their cannons on the village."

His men waited for the punchline. Lazily, seagulls cawed overhead.

"Fire on - on our own men?"

"I want that place burned. Now!"

The man nodded, dropped the oars he was working at a frantic pace and raised his hands in a pre-arranged gesture to the crows nest.

"I told that fool to stay away from the well," Columbus said, flinched as a cannon flashed and on the land a great explosion shamed the sun. For a while Columbus watched the inferno eat away the poison that stupidity in desperate times had allowed to grow.

He would not make the same mistake again.
Men of tomorrow would know his name.
But not for this.

Plague

Matthew Wilson

Death does walk alone
through perfumed streets,
his mask protection from coughing
patients he charms and greets.

Shaking hands with a poisoned
blacked bulbous finger,
that burns marks in doors of homes
that death will linger.

They have killed the cats and dogs
which let the rats breed,
paupers orgy in their final days
and rich men trust their greed

to keep them safe from cities
where death does stalk.
Shaking coughers by the hand
and into darkness walk.

Last Look

John Vicary

The winter is too hard.

The thought was a mantra in his head, a pounding rhythm in time with his heartbeat. It was the only unifying thing through the fever dreams that terrorized him. He wasn't sure what was the stuff of visions and what was real, but he did know that much.

The man didn't know how long he'd lain there. He'd thought he'd known pain before, and illness—but he'd been wrong. He'd never known this kind of utter misery that had wracked his bones and sapped his strength. There wasn't a cell in him that hadn't screamed out in torture. He had burned with fever and chilled with ague. His head felt split with his own axe, and his tongue had swelled so much that he couldn't drink even if he'd had the water to swallow. The man had never suffered so much in all his days.

When it was over, when he could again crack an eye to the light, *she* was gone. He couldn't say where, or even if she'd ever been there at all. The cabin was cold, and he wondered that he hadn't frozen to death in the long dark of the mountain season. He was weak as a babe, his limbs wasted and thin.

A babe.

The man threw off his filth-matted blanket, a memory jogging loose. Anxiety rose in his breast as his heart fluttered in his chest, a fragile thing trapped against the bones. He had never lacked strength before. It was impossible to tell from his tangle of delirium what had happened, if what he remembered was real. The horrors couldn't have come true. There were too many nightmares, too many twisted monstrosities from the fever. *Where is my son?*

The man's eyes rolled in their sockets before they settled on the box in the corner. It was there. It was no shadow, no figment. In the cold light of day, the box was still there. It had not evaporated in the rays like his other torments.

There was a keening, a great wail that would not stop. It took the man a moment to realize it was coming from him. From the depths of his sorrow,

he was screaming. He thought he might never stop. He knew the contents the box. He had a memory of the fever taking his son in the dark watches of the night. Why did that thought have to be the one that stayed? The image of holding the thin body until the last breath departed, the bellows of the body just collapsing seemed an affront to sanity. It was not a recollection the man yearned to keep. He clawed his hair to knock free the remembrance, but all he gained for his efforts was a sharp headache.

He could not dislodge the memory of holding close his son, the wasted frame and hollowed cheeks heralding death. Davy had always been plump and pink, but the fever had turned him blueish, his little stomach rock-hard and his face pinched with pain. The bloody flux was a force beyond reckoning, and the man had cried silent tears, weeping into the soft curls as he held his boy tight. It had been a blessing that the child had been sick but a day, his breathing slowing and stopping in a mercifully short time.

The ground had been too hard for the man to bury him, and the ravages of illness had begun to take him, as well. He'd lain here ever since. He'd lost all meaning of time. And he'd—senselessly—survived.

The man rose on shaking legs. The spade lay where he'd dropped it, right next to the door. He'd see this done, even if it meant his own death in the process. He wouldn't have his son unburied a moment longer.

The mountains in winter made it difficult to do justice to a Christian burial. The man was determined, and he attacked the ground with everything in his power. A light dusting of snow covered all, even his woodpile, but he chipped away until he had a slight indentation in the hard earth. The rest could be made up with rocks. The man assembled as many stones as he could for the cairn. He could make the cross later, but he owed it to Davy to see the boy in the ground before the next nightfall.

The box was heavier than he'd expected. He stumbled carrying it over the threshold, but he mustered the last reserves of his strength. He would not drop his boy, not like this. He would find whatever it took to bear the burden. The man ignored the odor and the seepage from the bottom as he lurched across the yard to the hole he'd made. He set the casket in the cradle of the earth. It was surreal to him to bury the boy with only the crows to bear witness.

He'd never imagined this scene when he'd held him, fresh and bloody from his mother's womb, and watched him nurse for the first time. What a

sight that had been! His Davy, his firstborn son. There had been nothing like it in the world, nothing that had prepared him for being a father. He'd heard about the joy of it, of course, but until he'd looked into those eyes—eyes just like Mary's, no matter how much she laughed and protested—and smelled the sour milk smell that only Davy had, he didn't know that his heart could tug like that. Little fingers wrapped around his. The man could cup his calloused hand against the whole fragile skull and feel the bones pulsing beneath. That baby's life, flowing right under his palm. It was his to take care of. The love flushed through his veins right then, sure and steady as the blood within that he needed to live. His heart had opened up and poured through him, and every day that Davy grew, his own heart had grown, too. No one had told him that.

The man stared at the hole in the ground. The hole that held his heart.

A morbid curiosity overcame him. He wanted to get one last look.

He had his memories, but it still didn't seem real. He couldn't believe it was true. He wanted to *see* the proof with his own eyes.

Once the idea made itself known to him, he couldn't shake it. He took up the spade, ready to cover the lid, but he paused. He knew it was shameful, but he was torn. He wanted to see his son. How wrong was he? Who would deny him that right? He was the father. He'd had total dominion over life, and so should he in death. He would do it.

The man knelt and placed his hands on the lid. A tremor shot through his body. A fear rose in him. What if the body were monstrous? What if he couldn't recognize him? Why did he have to do this? The man didn't understand his desire, but he was seized with a need to look upon the body. Only then could he bury his boy and say good bye.

A splinter lodged under his thumb, drawing blood, but the man ignored it as he drew back the lid. There was no turning back.

A ghastly smell assaulted him. It was decay and filth, it was rot. Tears rose in the man's eyes. Still, he had to see this through. He reached out his hand, bleeding and spindly, the image of a specter itself, and took the wrapping cloth from his son's face.

He did not flinch. He saw beauty there, and light. He saw his salvation, and he was not afraid.

Second Chances

Matthew Wilson

Graham knew everyone wished to be famous, struck by their fifteen minutes of fame. The difference was that they were other people, and therefore their dreams mattered nothing to him.

He'd been famous and lost it, which was worse. What did the others know of fame when he'd forgotten more of it than they'd ever possess? The world had needed his greatness and he had answered, built the rocket that blasted the coming asteroid to bits. And they'd loved him.

For a while.

No more children were named after him, no more grateful women threw themselves at him since his wrinkles. They forgot. Worse, they'd gotten complacent with their lives. His name might remain in tattered library books but who cared about such things in a modern age when stories happened on the silver screen.

He'd become redundant.

For a while.

Soon they'd name streets after him again, directors would ask to capture his life story. All they needed was a nudge in the right direction, a reminder of why he was great.

It had taken Graham years to secure the plague virus, feeling nostalgic to re-use the same equipment that constructed his earlier rocket. Locked away in an abandoned museum. Forgotten. Now he'd given it a new lease on life. A chance to create his second chance. And death on a mass scale.

He parked the car beside the lake and made sure the chemicals were at the right mixture, this spot accounted for ninety percent of the town's drinking water, and when the deaths happened with alarming rapidness, when panic made them feel all hope was lost... a name would be pulled from history.

They'd find him and he'd be willing to cure the loyal. It was his duty as a nice person. He'd been out of the spot light for so long he was afraid he'd die of old age before he put his plan in operation. But finally, it was here!

He thought it couldn't be long now before he made the cure. He was too old to wait any longer, sure he'd get it right eventually. The virus was the pyramid, he only had to create a gleaming stone on top from the blueprint of its chemical code.

It shouldn't take twenty years. At least this way he'd have some time to enjoy his moment in the sun. He unlocked the tap on the rear of the car and watched as the foul smelling liquid started pouring into the water. Fish with upturned eyes floated to the surface, belly up.

Come morning, at breakfast the same thing would happen on a grander scale and people would look for a hero with a cure.

For a while.

The Infected Ship

Matthew Wilson

There is plague aboard this ship
that has killed the rats and turned black my lips.
We have come so far in the stars but cannot outrun
the killer of our forefathers who took the gun.

A quick death to save themselves the agony of slow death
where black boils hinder their ragged breath.
We each have our families, our next of kin
and for their sakes we can't let anyone in.

I have turned off the air and death's taken some,
the ones not sleeping have chosen the gun.
For myself, an explorer, I've turned us toward a star
time for a poem before we burn, this plague, like us, will not get far.

Happy

Alex S. Johnson

It started with the President. He appeared live on television, flanked by the Vice-President and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Reading from a prepared statement, he explained the mental operations behind his ultimate decision to attack Syraq. After long and considered thought and consultation with the works of Thomas Aquinas and St. Augustine, it was clear to the Chief Executive that Syraq's leadership was seriously disturbed. Evidence obtained through multiple intelligence channels was irrefutable: use of chemical and biological weapons against their own citizens, the extensive use of torture to suppress dissidents, and other crimes "so foul they cannot be named." He asked for patience from the American public, 41% of whom vehemently opposed the use of military force in Syraq. He understood that the country was suffering, that unemployment levels stood at an all-time high, that 80% of adults lived from paycheck to paycheck, that many believed the current economic morass was due in large part to wars begun by a previous administration, still simmering and claiming lives. He had carefully weighed the country's ills against the higher question of punishing Syraq's hyperaggressive conduct. His course was bleak but undeniable: the U.S. would have to act, and act now, before the terror spread even further.

He raised his hand to make an emphatic gesture. "This aggression… will not and cannot stand. It is a threat to the most basic standards of human decency. It…" Then something changed. A broad smile began to spread across his face. The wrinkles on his forehead smoothed. Suddenly, he looked years younger. "You know what will really not stand," he said, "is this pompous bullshit. I mean please, does anybody still think the United States has moral authority left?" He began to mock the language used by his speechwriter to appease the American public and rationalize yet another foreign military intervention. "Weapons of mass hysteria. Saber-rattling rhetoric. Righteous indignation. Puh-lease. Haven't we heard all this before? Okay, and supposing the threat was completely 100% legitimate; we still sold Syraq the weapons and secretly gave them the green light to use them however they saw fit. A massive circle-jerk all around." He scanned the rest of the speech, giggling. "Hey, here's an idea. Instead of the

usual macho posturing, why don't we just chill, smoke a bowl and attend to more important things. Like health care, education, jobs, and…shit…there I go again." He chucked the speech to the floor. "Why can't we just be happy?"

And that was all it took. The President's words echoed in boardrooms and battlegrounds, across all strata of society. CEO's succumbed to hysterical laughter in the midst of quarterly reports. Stockholder meetings became marathon joke-fests. Brain surgery was now a spontaneous, zany art form. The U.S. Treasury issued a new currency in which Presidential faces were distorted and caricatured or outright replaced with images of bacon and chocolate pudding. Priests and ministers switched from scaring their congregations with the threat of eternal Hellfire to the telling of elaborate, ribald jokes. Congressional meetings were remixed live by a DJ. Mortuaries rocked with fun. Violence fell out of favor with generals and street gangs alike. Conflicts were settled not with fists, guns or knives but cream pies and squirt pistols. Wacky was the new efficient.

People felt better. A whole lot better. Depressives shrugged off the crushing weight of sadness and filled landfills with disposed pharmaceuticals. Total strangers embraced when they met on the street. Schools melted into playgrounds and playgrounds became indistinguishable from offices. The police went from busting heads to forming conga lines with protesters. Eventually, the rigid lines between public decorum and private frivolity began to fade. All felt the euphoria, from a mild tingling sensation in the pit of the stomach to the urgent need to flip, do handstands and cartwheels, to the reckless impulse that made thousands shed their clothes and do their jobs *au naturel*, freeballing and tittie-flopping to their heart's content. Enrollment at clown schools swelled. Floppy shoes were the fashion of the day.

Then came the crash. One by one, the citizens felt a switch snap in their minds. They saw the ruin of the infrastructure, swaying and sagging bridges, whimsical sculptures made of freeway exchanges, vehicles composed of random and arbitrary materials, soft buildings that collapsed on the inhabitants like deflated bubble gum, traffic signals that flashed cheery but meaningless emoticons. Money was useless. Industry ground to a halt. There were no more causes to back or values to hold firm. Inside, people were far from happy. They were miserable, scared, panicked.

Yet despite these inner changes, they found that the smiles had been seared into their faces. The slightest stimulus still brought convulsions of laughter. But the laughter no longer served a purpose. It failed to relieve tension. It gave no release. They rocked like mechanical dolls, holding their bellies, bodies transformed into motors of painful glee.

And then they understood. The happiness epidemic was not a joyful thing. It was a plague, sure as typhoid, the Black Death or AIDS. But instead of puss-filled boils, fever, dehydration and flesh-rot, the symptoms manifested as giggles, chortles, belly-laughs, snickers, nervous laughter, sham laughter, irony, paradoxical laughter, side-splitters, gags, practical jokes, pranks, Knock-Knock jokes and brain teasers. Those affected cracked wise, eased off zippy one-liners and crafted multi-tiered pun fugues. But as the days, weeks and months went by, a deep fatigue set in. They were bone-tired, completely enervated, yet mouths continued to move and tongues continued to form sounds and the sounds were words and sentences that made smooth, inexorable patterns designed to trigger mirth, an emotion more dreadful now than buboes, sepsis, necrosis or respiratory failure.

In the final stages of the disease, the infected became either skeletally thin, unable to ingest food, wasted away or ballooned into bags of quivering jelly. They laughed until their stomachs ripped open and intestines slopped out, until brains turned to mush, hearts exploded and blood leaked from every orifice. They laughed until their lungs collapsed and they lay sprawled and spent, rigor mortis tugging their lips into final, macabre grins.

For Death, too, has a lighter side.

Rotten

Ken L. Jones

I always thought that it would always stand
Or at least if it did fall
That it would be to something big and grand
And not brought on by germs so small
Now civilization was never to my taste
Was too crowded and with too many people
Now that's the least of my worries these days
Which have been eclipsed by something far more evil
Reeking corpse piles everywhere
And the crows who upon them feast
Make it hard to keep the canned foods down
That I so meticulously rummaged for and gleaned
And oh I used to think that the city smelled
But little did I know the sweet sour nauseating odor
Of millions of corpses as on the wind it blows
And what of my fellows I'm not exactly alone yet
Why they're madder than outhouse rats
There's only a few dozen of us left now I think
And I have the cure for that
For every time I meet one of them in a compromising situation
There's one less of them to tick me off
Or to prevent me from seeking my own elations
For I decided soon into this that all of this should end
That mankind had too long had his day
And now it's time for something else to win
Maybe dolphins, maybe house cats, maybe the zoo animals
Who someone has let out
Any of them could make better use of this planet than we did
I mean what was that all about?
Centuries spent clawing up from the mud
For a brief strut on the stage
And all of that knocked into a cocked hat

By something as simple as a sneeze
And when I'm sure that I alone am the only man on Earth
I'll opt out like that Nirvana guy did
I think his name was Kurt?
A shotgun blast and then at last
All of this chaos and this confusion
Will be long gone and forgotten
As I join the ranks of those who didn't struggle
Against this very hard but gave in early, fast and often
And then I too will be just rags and bones
And a bad smelling pile at that
As I too accept the ultimate fate
That has been dropped in my lap
Nothing special I never was
Just fertilizer in the end
Just another garbage pile
Smelling rotten on the wind.

Rodent Dialogue

Shaun Avery

Anyone who's worked in TV will tell you the same thing: it's pretty hard to show people something that's never been seen before, even harder to shock them.

So I always thought, anyway.

Until the talking rat turned up on my show.

That was a pretty bad year already – one in which tons of people were dying from some mystery virus. All that death and misery was really playing havoc with our ratings.

And our staff.

I'd had to sack a couple of guys for taking too much sick time.

Me, though, I was fine. I didn't go out much. I mean, why bother when all the women and drugs I wanted (and I wanted a lot) could be delivered straight to my house?

That's probably why I was so surprised when Doctor Dennis, physician to the stars, started showing the slide show of the infected.

'Look at it,' he said, pointing to a large screen slightly above us. 'The decaying limbs. The running sores.' He paused for emphasis, meeting first my eyes then gazing up towards the audience. 'And that's only the first stage of the infection.'

As if on cue, the audience gasped.

All except one of them, I noted.

He was sitting up somewhere near the back, and though the studio lights were blazing hot, he was wearing this big, thick coat, and a hat that obscured his face.

I frowned.

Why did Vince let him in, looking like that? I wondered.

Then I remembered.

I'd sacked Vince, my one time head of security, when he requested time off to take his infected daughter to the hospital.

Shaking my head, I looked back to Dennis.

Who was looking at me as if expecting an answer.

‘Sorry,’ I said, never missing a beat, professional as ever. ‘Could you repeat that please?’

‘I was just saying,’ he said, ‘that despite much research, no one seems to know exactly where the virus came from, and why it only affects some of us.’ He smiled. ‘I was just wondering, Doug, do you have any ideas?’

‘I don’t know where it came from,’ I replied, ‘but from what I’ve read in the papers, it’s the rats that are spreading it.’

That was when the man in the big coat stood up.

Only – and you’ve probably guessed this – it wasn’t a man.

When he cast off the coat and threw aside the hat, I saw that he was a rat.

A walking, talking, human-sized rat.

‘Lies!’ he shouted, pointing at Doctor Dennis and me. ‘Human propaganda!’

I was worried by this strange creature’s behaviour. In fact, I was starting to wonder if I shouldn’t have been more understanding when Vince started crying down the phone to me about his daughter.

But then, thinking of the ratings, a smile spread across my face.

‘My friend,’ I said, motioning towards the rat. ‘Why don’t you come down and join us?’

As he did so, I had one of my assistants pull up a chair for him. And with a sour look on his face, he sat down across from me, a little to the left of Dennis.

There were a few seconds of silence then, none of us really knowing what to say. But then my professional spirit flooded to the fore, and I said to the rat, ‘could I get your name?’

‘Terry,’ he said.

‘Of course it is,’ I replied. ‘Terry the rat. And can I ask why you’ve joined us here tonight, live on *Doug’s Vital Topics*?’

‘Because I’m sick,’ he said, and at this point he turned to face the Doctor. ‘Sick of you and your kind blaming this . . . illness on us.’

‘By “us” you mean rats?’ I asked, smiling.

‘That is correct.’

‘You have no argument,’ Dennis said. I sensed that he was just as baffled as I was by all of this, but like any true professional he was trying to take it all in his stride. Either that or he assumed it was just another episode of hit hidden-camera show *Suicidal Pranks*.

He went on, ‘the virus is spread through dirt and filth, and –’

‘And you just assume that rats are the filthiest thing on this planet, right?’

‘Well,’ Dennis retorted, ‘aren’t you?’

‘Take a look at the litter on your streets,’ Terry said. ‘Then ask me that again.’

I was thinking, *social commentary from a rodent.* I was thinking: *I love TV.* But then, I had always known that, right? I had always been aware that I loved the goggle-box more than I could ever have loved any woman, though I frequently said otherwise to the whores I called to my home, telling each one that she was my only true love as I shot my hot load up their backs and on their faces. But what’s wrong with that? Surely a man should love his job, no?

Indeed.

That was when Terry turned to me.

I’d never thought a rat could smile.

But he was just about to prove me wrong.

‘I’m going to prove to you,’ he said, ‘and to all of the people watching at home, that human beings are just as capable of depraved and filthy acts as myself and my vermin brethren.’

His eyes met mine.

‘See, we rats – not the ones like me, but the smaller ones, the ones who can get in anywhere without you even noticing – we watch. And we see things.’

I knew then.

Knew that, despite the cameras, despite the millions of people watching at home, he was talking directly to me.

He knew what I got up to at home.

Stuff I would never want my fans to find out about.

The orgies. The drugs. The hookers.

And that’s just a Sunday.

‘You humans might be dying in your millions from some strange virus,’ Terry went on. ‘But don’t you dare blame us. The things you get up to, you’ve no *right* to get on our backs.’

‘Things,’ Dennis said, ‘like what?’

That was when Terry unleashed that smile.

And just a heartbeat later, *she* appeared.

She walked onto the stage, coming via an entrance that Vince was no longer able to protect, and my jaw dropped as I took it all in: the killer heels, the shapely legs, the great rack, the whiskers, the tail . . .

Hold on a minute.

Back that train right up.

Something wasn't right in that description, was it?

But it *was* right.

Felt it, anyway.

Like Terry, the babe that walked towards us was a rat.

Only . . .

'Not all doctors are as reputable as yourself,' Terry was saying to Dennis. 'Some of them were willing to perform certain . . . enhancements on my sister Bronwyn here.'

Was it wrong to feel glad, I wondered, that he said 'sister' rather than 'wife?'

Fuck it, I decided.

I was glad anyway.

'I worry for my fellow professional,' Dennis said. He shook his head. 'But what exactly is the purpose of this charade?'

'I'm sick of everyone seeing my race as filthy, plague-ridden beasts,' Terry told him. 'Especially when some of your own species are no better than mine.'

'Like who?' Dennis asked.

Terry just pointed.

By now, Bronwyn had draped herself across my knee.

Put her hairy silicone breasts into my face.

Jiggled them about a bit.

I looked down at them.

At her.

And just when, I asked myself, had I started stroking that long tail of hers?

As if from another world – a much less interesting one – Dennis said, 'Doug?'

I drooled.

I felt my erection growing.

Straining and pulsing in a way that the whores I serviced on a weekly basis had never been able to provide.

‘Well, this is *really* proving your point,’ Dennis said to Terry. ‘Prostituting your sister on live television . . .’

‘Ah, that practice is solely a *human* one,’ Terry protested. ‘My sister makes her own choices. She’s a fan of his.’

‘That’s right,’ Bronwyn said. ‘I am.’

And then she repositioned herself on my aching penis.

Leant in close.

And whispered in my ear . . .

Well, I won’t tell you *exactly* what she said.

But anyone who’s seen the footage can tell you the result.

I mean, I’d thought we lived in a permissive society. I thought anything went, and nothing could shock anymore. But flip a silicone-stuffed humanoid rat over live on TV and you soon discover that your supposedly devoted fans are actually puritanical, Ofcom-bothering bedwetters.

I lost my show.

I lost my house.

I couldn’t even live on the streets.

They were too full of dead people, as the virus grew worse and more powerful.

So I moved into the sewers.

With Bronwyn.

And you know, it’s pretty funny how things turn out. Terry came on my programme to prove than certain members of society were much worse than his race. He actually ended up showing me that I was much happier, much more content, living with rats. Well, with one rat in particular.

We were married not too long afterwards.

Terry was the best man.

I sent an invitation to Dennis, but I never heard back from him.

I guess him, and people like him, are still busy trying to work out where the virus came from. What it is, and why it does what it does. Maybe we’ll never know. But I can tell you one thing:

Try to blame the rats and I’ll punch you in the face.

A Sloth's View on Life

Benjamin Welton

The guy sitting across from me was about twenty-eight, over six feet, and as thin and worn-out looking as any picture of Burroughs. His eyes bore the hallmarks of incessant crying as well as nonexistent sleep. In short, he looked like shit and he was sitting on my couch, which also happened to look like shit. He held in his hands a photograph, something that I hadn't seen since the last time the Cubs had won the World Series (which coincidentally had been the last season of professional baseball). The picture was a daytime shot of three people milling around in a park. The man in the foreground looked eighteen, with long, unkempt blonde hair and a blue poplin shirt that looked like a hand-me-down. The other man in the picture looked about the same age, and his brown hair was similarly ratty. His flannel shirt looked a little cleaner, though, and this might've had something to do with the girl standing closely to him. She was wearing a white cotton blouse that had rather short sleeves. Her bare arms bore the traces of exercise; their curvy, toned ripples were just enough to invoke fitness, but not enough to draw accusations of butchness. I would describe her face (which I assumed was pretty), but her back was turned in the picture; no beautiful mug for old Lukey boy, no means of identification.

The guy took the picture back after I was done with it, and before placing it in his breast pocket, he spent another few seconds ruminating over these three individuals. He looked hurt because they weren't talking to him. Maybe they never had talked to him, or maybe they never will again. Either way, he wanted desperately to talk to someone, and on that day, that someone was me.

"I am here, Mr. Borchard, because I heard from a friend that you're exceptionally good at finding people."

"I've found five out of seven so far. That's not too bad…considering the circumstances."

"Yes, of course. My name is Craig Doyle. I used to work at a hotel before it all happened. I was a doorman."

"Ever used your coat to cover a sleeping bathroom attendant?"

"What? I don't understand what you're saying."

“It’s immaterial; something from my life before.”

“Which was?”

“I was a college student for a while. I even managed to graduate. Then I worked as a librarian, which I enjoyed very much. Just me and all the old, lost things of culture. Anyway, this isn’t about me and my tribulations. Please get down to business, Mr. Doyle.”

“Okay. The three people in that picture are all my friends. Excuse me, were. Martin and Ricky are dead. They were killed when SCD first hit. Martin worked on the docks, so he was one of the very first ones in the whole city to develop it. It took longer with Ricky, but he died just the same. I often wonder why I’ve been so lucky, and then I remind myself that this isn’t luck.”

He looked down at his chewed-up hands which showed signs of recent overuse. His nails were merely yellow crescent moon stubs that looked like they were retreating back into his skin. His wrists were dented and had a purplish hue to them. He had been interrogated at some point. His whole appearance (not to mention his age) made him a likely suspect. The police probably thought he was PPD (Post-Human Plague Dealers) or a member of one of the many anarchistic groups that had sprang up after the government acknowledged the existence of SCD. They had probably kept him for a while, judging by the deepness of his wounds.

“What about the girl in the picture?”

“That’s exactly why I am here. Her name is Magdalena Cortez. She disappeared four days ago.”

“And you would like me to locate her for you?”

“Yes, precisely.”

“OK. First, I already have a problem with this. I have no idea what this girl looks like. The picture you just gave isn’t worth a dime, so do you have any other pictures of her?”

“I am sorry. I do not.”

“How do you expect me to find her then?”

“I can describe her to you. I know her well. We…we are lovers—boyfriend and girlfriend. We’ve been dating for over a year now, and I can still feel every inch of her on my fingertips, especially now that I cannot actually hold her.”

Craig Doyle hugged himself them. His embrace was tight, and he kept his eyes closed the entire time. I felt like I was intruding on an intimate

moment. I started playing with my BIC lighter to suppress the awkwardness. He noticed, and soon came back to the present.

"I've been such a mess since she disappeared. I cry a lot at nights, and I sometimes play the videos we made together over and over again."

"Well, since you don't have any other pictures of her, can I see these videos?"

"I can mail them to you. For now, I can tell you what she looks like, what she smells like, and how her voice sounds."

"It's not much, but it's better than going into this thing totally blind. Try to not poeticize this either; I can't find people based on their exaggerations."

In an hour he told me all about Magdalena Cortez. She was twenty-two, Honduran, and somewhere around five feet even. She spoke with a strong Spanish accent, and she had a sparkling personality. I highly doubted that that sparkling personality would last in the current environment, so I didn't delude myself into thinking that she'd embrace me with open arms. The new world changed people, and even an angel on earth like Magdalena Cortez would be a little meaner than she once was. I left my apartment with my pistol just in case.

It was raining that day, so I dipped into the cafeteria on my block. Ever since SCD hit, cafeterias had made a comeback, and now there was one on every block. It made me feel old when I remembered that this used to be the case with Starbucks, but that was considered a luxury now. I grabbed a bowl of soup and some coffee and sat down by the window. I pulled out my case notebook and diagrammed my plan of attack. Craig Doyle gave me the names and addresses of some of Magdalena's friends, so I would pester them with questions right after my perfunctory chat with Detective Vince McAvoy, my friend in Missing Persons. I questioned whether or not he would see me since Missing Persons was by far and away the busiest department. Before SCD, that distinction had belonged to Homicide, but now the city was considered the safe zone where people fought to stay alive and keep them out, not leech off and exploit one another like they used to. It's funny how tragedy, real, biblical tragedy, makes humans just a little bit better. Well, for a while at least.

The walk to the precinct made me think about what the crack in this peaceful façade would look like. Even though I had food and coffee in my stomach, I was still the same old morose bastard that I'd always been. When

I reached Detective McAvoy's desk, I figured that the first outbreak of homicidal violence in the city since SCD would somehow involve an attack on a hospital.

"Luke Borchard. The goddamn thorn in my fucking side. What miracle do you want me to perform this time?"

Detective McAvoy was a short, bulldog-looking black man with a Thelonious Monk goatee. He was about fifty years-old, and he could easily kick my ass. His tight polo shirt clearly showed well-sculpted pecs and biceps. It looked he was one flex away from exposing his gym membership.

"I am looking for another lost, unrepentant soul. At least this one sounds pretty."

"Got sick of chasing after dudes?"

"I am open-minded."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing more than anything Edward Lear ever penned. Look, I need your help again. Do you have anything on a Magdalena Cortez? She's a Honduran national, about twenty-two, and she's been AWOL for four days."

"Who's paying you now?"

"Did you wake up today and decide to ask all the wrong questions? My client has a right to privacy."

"Borchard, you're as thoughtless as any piece of trash stuck under your gumshoes. No one has privacy now. There are CCTV cameras on every block. We've got national ID cards now. Hell, my men don't even need a warrant to barge into any apartment or house at any time. This is Missing Persons. We've got the governor's blessing to do whatever it takes by any means necessary."

"People do love to give their freedoms up, don't they? All in the name of a little security."

"Don't hand me none of that bullshit. That kook Krasinsky down the hall is one of them libertarian shitbirds too, and he feeds me that same line every day. If you ask me, that's nothing but scared white folks trying to justify their guns and their bad deeds. All I care about is getting people back from the brink, and if that means interrupting dinner, then so be it."

"Will you help me or not? You owe me one after the Seong case, and you know it."

"Christ. Are you going to hold that zipperhead over me for the rest of my life?"

“That’s a dirty word, McAvoy. It offends me.”

“Fuck you, you vulture. We both know that you ain’t got feelings. All you care about is getting the green into your greasy hands.”

“So you’re slandering me now. Wait until my lawyer hears about this. She’s Asian, too.”

“Alright. I’ll see what I can dig up on this hot tamale of yours. I can’t promise anything; it’s a mess out there. I wouldn’t be surprised if Jesus came tomorrow.”

“He’d probably turn around and call the whole thing off. We’re not worth it.”

“For once you’ve said something I agree with. I hope the whole shithouse burns with all the rats still in it.”

The first name on Craig Doyle’s list was Sonal Ramkaree. Her apartment was on the third floor of a rather posh building in what had formerly been the city’s business district. The door was mahogany brown, and after the tiny Indian girl opened it, she revealed the apartment’s lush interior. The afternoon sun was calmed by gingham drapes that reached all the way down to the linoleum floor. There was a bar counter connected to the kitchen, which was about as big as an airplane’s restroom. The living room took up most of the floor space, and its main attraction was a comfortable brown leather couch. There was a glass coffee table with a coffee table book on it. The book had probably come from the bookcase which abutted the coffee table. The bookcase was wooden and black, and it was covered with framed photographs. All the pictures contained Ms. Ramkaree and an attractive blonde girl. Here they were by a waterfall, here they were hiking up a mountain. Clearly, this was Ms. Ramkaree’s partner.

“So, Craig Doyle gave you my name? Have I done anything?”

“You think I am a cop or something?”

“You seem like the type. I used to watch a lot of those detective shows. You know, back when there was such a thing as TV.”

“Never liked it myself. My name is Luke Borchard, and I am a locator.”

“A what?”

“I locate people for the lovesick, the homesick, and the generally sick. They pay me, though.”

“A private detective?”

“No, I prefer locator. I don’t carry a badge or a Photostat.”

“But you do carry a gun, unless you have a tumor in your arm.”

“Good eyes. Were you a cop before all of this?”

“No. I was a paralegal. Not too far off, right?”

“Same vein. Hopefully, our shared love of the law will make this easier. I am looking for Magdalena Cortez. Do you have any idea where she might have gone?”

“No, because I don’t even know who that is.”

“Wait a minute. I am talking about Craig Doyle’s girlfriend. Attractive Hispanic girl with a bubbly personality. You have to know what I am talking about.”

“I am sorry, but I don’t. It’s a shame too, for this Magdalena Cortez sounds like a person I should meet.”

“By the looks of things, I’d call that cheating.”

“I would too if Sarah were still around. She left right after the president made the speech about SCD. She panicked and went back home.”

“Where was home?”

“Vermont. A small, rural town.”

“They probably got her.”

“Yes, or she became one of them. Either way, I prefer to think of her as peacefully dead, Mr. Borchard. So, unless you plan on setting me up on dates, you are of no help to me right now. I don’t know any Magdalena Cortez, and I don’t like strangers talking to me about my dead girlfriend.”

“Okay. I know where the door is. Answer one question for me. Does Craig Doyle have a history of lying?”

“Not that I remember, but a lot of people have changed in these last few years. You probably know that better than most.”

“I wish I didn’t. Have a nice life.”

Even though I knew the answer, I still contacted the rest of the names on the list that Craig Doyle had given me. After Sonal Ramkaree, there had been Jake McDonald, a fat asthmatic who had also never heard of Magdalena Cortez. Next up was Sally and Dwayne Page. Again, no dice. The last name on the list was Schuyler Ross, and he lived almost near the city’s edge. For once, I got to talk to someone who lived in a house. It was a modest affair, with white vinyl siding and red shutters. It somehow looked garish and homey at the same time. The house’s occupant was quite the opposite. Schuyler Ross was a middle aged black man with white hair and a well-kept

beard. He was wearing an auburn sweater over a white Oxford, with tan slacks and brown loafers. Mr. Ross was a man who believed in putting his best foot forward, and I doubted if a dirty t-shirt could be found on the premises.

After the cursory introductions, Schuyler Ross invited me to a cup of coffee. I took it and drank it quickly. I got another cup, then another. Schuyler Ross was still on his first, taking bird-like sips which had long stretches of time between one another. I opened the interview with a different approach.

"How long have you known Craig Doyle, Mr. Ross?"

"Six years, give or take. We used to work together at the hotel. He was a doorman, while I was the head chef."

"Did you two interact often?"

"Not much, but I liked him just the same. He's an affable sort, with a good work ethic."

"Did he ever lie to you?"

This question struck him something hard. Schuyler Ross looked off into space for a long time. His thumbs made large circles on the lip of his coffee cup. Schuyler Ross was thinking hard, but not much was coming to the surface.

"I can't remember for sure. I doubt it; we didn't know each other well enough for such an opportunity to arise. Why do you ask?"

"You see, he has hired me to locate his girlfriend. Pretty cut and dry, right? There's two major problems, though. One, I have no idea what this girl looks like. My only reference point is a photograph that doesn't even show her face. Two, no one on this list that he gave me can say anything about Magdalena Cortez. In fact, all of them so far have admitted to never having heard of her. Are you in the same boat?"

"Looks like it. 'Magdalena Cortez' is a name that I am thoroughly unfamiliar with. I hate to tell you, but it sounds like you might be after a wild goose."

"Or waiting for Godot. Either way, I don't like it."

"I may be able to help you in another way. I know very well how hard it is to start a job that you can't finish. I could tell you some tales about making pot pies, believe me."

"Do you want me to catch a runaway meat pie?"

“No, but I haven’t had one of those in ages, so thanks for whetting my appetite. No, I would like you to find someone. This person exists, and I am convinced that she is still alive. It’s my niece Angela. She disappeared last month, and even though the police tell me that’s she’s dead, I can’t believe it. Here’s a picture of her.”

The picture he handed me looked like a yearbook photo. The girl in the picture was homely and beefy, especially for a teenager. She had a kind face, though, and I figured her for a real sweetheart. She looked like the type that still said “please” and “thank you,” and never did anything without first consulting mommy and daddy.

“What can you tell me about Angela’s last known whereabouts?”

“She lives on Hermandale. Her place is on the second floor. Before SCD hit, she had been in culinary school. She wanted to follow in the footsteps of her favorite uncle.”

His eyes were twinkling furiously after he said this. Part of the twinkle was caused by moisture, tears primarily. Schuyler Ross was on the verge of breaking down right in front of me. I was worried because I had left my handkerchief at home.

“Hermandale? That’s where all the squatter punks and PPD creeps live. Angela doesn’t look like the type.”

“She changed after SCD. She wasn’t alone; a lot of other people went a little crazy. I am sure you know that better than anyone else.”

“So people keep telling me. I’ll look into Angela for you. You can send the money to this address.”

I handed him my card and headed out the door into the building twilight. My search for Magdalena Cortez was bringing me down, so I bought a case of beer at my local liquor store before going home. I was four beers deep when McAvoy called.

“Hey, you turd. Guess what?”

“Magdalena Cortez doesn’t exist.”

“Damn. Maybe you ain’t so dumb after all. According to our extensive records, Magdalena Cortez is a phantom.”

“I didn’t know the police did paranormal work now.”

“You kidding? That’s all we do.”

“Well, while you’re still ghost hunting, can you look up another person for me?”

“I ain’t your butler, you know.”

“Will you just suck it up for one more? I have a feeling this one’s going to be easier. The name is Angela Ross.”

“OK, shitheel, I’ll give it an hour– tops!”

McAvoy slammed the phone down. I guess he was angry at me for some reason. I had always felt that I was a likeable enough guy, but maybe I had changed like everyone else. I didn’t feel different, but maybe victims of fate never do. I drank two more beers and then feel asleep drunk.

In the morning, I called on Craig Doyle. He opened up on the second knock.

“Why did you lie to me?”

“Oh God! Please forgive me.”

“Answer the question: why did you send me on a twenty-four hour goose chase?”

“What!? No. Magdalena is actually missing, but I did lie to you about her and I being lovers. We...we never dated. She lived below me, and I always fancied her. I was just about to ask her out, when I started noticing that she wasn’t coming home anymore. You see, I used to listen to her through my carpet. Our building is not well-constructed, so I could always hear when she came home.”

“No offense, but you’re a creep.”

“No, I am not a creep! I was in love with her. Lovers do strange things.”

“Let me get this straight, then. You never actually talked to her?”

“I could never work up the nerve to. She was just too beautiful.”

“I am going to be frank with you: does Magdalena Cortez exist?”

“Of course she does.”

“Then why can’t I find her. None of the people on the list you gave me know anything about a ‘Magdalena Cortez.’”

“That’s because that might not be her name.”

“What? You made up a name?”

“Yes. I never knew what her name was, so I gave her one. I knew she was Spanish because I could hear her speaking her native tongue below me. I always liked the name Magdalena; it seemed perfect for her. She was truly angelic.”

“OK, pal. You’re officially whacked. You hired me to locate someone you’ve never even talked to. Furthermore, you don’t even know her name.”

“But the people on that list should. I’ve seen them all talk to her before. They know who she is. I just thought if you described her to them, they would be able to give you her real name.”

“I am going to be very blunt with you again: did you stalk this woman?”

He took a while in answering. The answer clearly upset him, so he was looking for ways to justify himself. Craig Doyle was more than likely a nice guy; a weirdo, but nice nonetheless. But his virginity (or at least I pegged him as a virgin) made him do odd things from time to time, such as creating a girlfriend out of a downstairs stranger. When he finally answered my question, his eyes were looking over my head and they were shanked to the left.

“I guess you could call it that. I certainly followed her while I struggled with the courage to talk to her. I am a very shy person, so it was incredibly difficult for me. She was so beautiful.”

“You keep saying that, but it means nothing to me. How do you expect me to find this girl? And if I do find her, what’s in it for you?”

“I just want to see her again. Maybe I could even talk to her. You don’t understand. Ever since SCD, she’s all I’ve lived for. My parents are dead, my cat died, and I can’t work anymore because the state ordered that I was too mentally unstable for employment in the city. I live off of measly welfare. So when she came into my life, I found a reason for staying on Earth. When she was gone, I felt like dying all over again. I wanted to die then, and I still want to die now. I don’t like feeling this way, so I contacted you because a friend of mine said you were the best. Do you remember Dennis Stafford? That’s my friend’s brother.”

Dennis Stafford had been an ugly case. He had been a high school teacher out in the country when SCD came. His family figured him for dead, but his brother (whose name had been Barry) believed that Dennis was still alive because Dennis had once been in the Army, and because of that, he knew how to survive in desperate situations. It turned out that Barry was right; I found Dennis about ten miles outside of the city living in a fortified grocery store. He wasn’t alone, either. In that one case I managed to locate over five people. I raked in a handsome payday then, but the money wasn’t worth it. That was the case that almost forced me into an early retirement. Not only had it been my first time out of the city since the burgh had been permanently quarantined, but it had been my first time

dealing with them. They were just outside of the grocery store that Dennis and the rest had turned into a fortress. They attacked the place in large numbers, and it was a miracle that I had managed to get everyone out and into my car. I never saw one of them during that night spent inside of the grocery store, but I could hear them. They bayed like hounds, and their fingers scratched and scraped at the glass doors like demonic window cleaners. I hated them because they revolted me down to the very fiber of my being. I had to keep telling myself throughout the night that they were just Missing People—the ones that could never be found again. It helped, but not much.

"I remember the case a little too well."

"Yeah, he told me it was a bad few days. He also told me that you're the best guy around for this type of work. I believe him, and I am still willing to pay you for your services."

"You realized that I might as well be pushing a boulder up a hill on this one, right?"

"Sisyphus. You're rather smart."

"I am when I need to be. I don't know if I am smart enough for this case, though."

"No, you are. The description I gave you still fits. She has to be in the city—it can't be that hard, after all."

"Jesus Christ! Are you for real?"

"Sorry. I just want her back in my life."

"Go get laid, kid."

With that I left the apartment, swearing to drop the case. After all, I had Angela Ross to hunt after. Something still compelled me about the short and sad life of Craig Doyle. It was as if I too had been taken under by the charms of Magdalena Cortez, a phantom, a make-believe, and a fabrication of epic proportions. Even when I started looking for Angela, I thought mostly about beautiful Magdalena and her sweet way of talking Spanish. I imaged her with hazel eyes and a walnut brown complexion. My Magdalena was also fond of summer dresses and cocktails. She left late in the mornings, and when she did wake up, she was already right there by the coffee maker, ready to talk about our shared loneliness. I was totally lost by that point; I was Craig Doyle.

I got to Hermandale a little after noon. The street was in ruinous disrepair. It had been that way before SCD, but the disease made the filth

filthier. Hermandale was a sewer full of human rubbish. I typically avoided cases involving Hermandale because the locals were so antagonistic to all intrusions. I had only taken the Angela Ross case because I had felt like I was in no position to say "no" to old Schuyler Ross. I sometimes wish that I wasn't so considerate.

None of the doors that I knocked on answered. I knew that people were home, but when someone with neatly trimmed hair that's one color shows up on your stoop, you're never home, even when you're cooking dinner or taking a natural in the bathroom. I was on the verge of going home when a skid row type accosted me. He was wearing a worn leather jacket, a watch cap, blue jeans, and a black t-shirt.

"What's up? You looking for somebody down here in our kingdom?"

"Are you the king?"

"Maybe, or maybe I am the castle guard tasked with keeping the peasants out."

"You're so fucked up that you don't even recognize that you're the peasant."

"Wrong, fuzz. You're the pissant 'round here, so you better scat unless you want some Huxley."

Huxley was the synthetic hallucinogen that was first introduced after scientists started recognizing what SCD did to the infected. Its original form was as an antibacterial agent that was breathed as a nasal spray. Some dopey kid in the state lab decided to steal a batch and turn it into LSD light, with a particular emphasis on the LSD part. It started to spread on the streets quickly, and its cheap price made it as alluring as crack had been in '80s. Hermandale was hotbed of Huxley activity, and its sale and distribution kept more than a few Hermandale pockets fat. The man standing before me looked like a low-level pusher, not a bigwig supplier.

"What is it then? I can get you a case of about twelve bottles. That'll keep you high for years, man. Expensive, though."

"Keep your trips to yourself. I am here looking for a girl. Angela Ross. Heard of hear?"

"I hear of a lot of people. Got a picture?"

I handed the graduation picture over to him. His hands were full of blisters and scabs. Bathing was probably not his thing.

"A fat and ugly slit. I only enjoy prime rib, chief."

“Somehow I doubt that. I also doubt that you’ve never seen her before. She used to live here, on this very street. You and I both know that Hermandale is a hole, but not a very big one. Stop lying and tell me where she is.”

“Buzz off, porker. I don’t know her, and even if I did, why the hell would I tell you?”

“Maybe because of this.”

I had pulled out my pistol. It was aimed at his gut. I hadn’t cocked the hammer yet, but I figured that even this human lizard would understand my point. He did.

“Okay, Okay. Go easy, man. I can take you to O’Dell’s pad. That’s where all the action is. If she ain’t there, then she ain’t alive.”

We walked four blocks or so before we came to O’Dell’s. It was a former factory converted into apartments on the corner of Bay and Stoneham. The exterior was imposing, with red brick walls and white window outlines that somehow looked like eyes. Very, very angry eyes. We took the steps up to the top floor. They creaked the whole way in the eerie silence of the building. At first glance, O’Dell’s did not look like it had seen any action in a while, if ever. Dust covered the entire ground floor, and the ensuing floors were just as barren. When we got to the top floor, we looked inside to see a long, rectangle room that was scattered with sleeping bags and the occasional cooking utensil. It had all the markings of a squatter community, and I was sure that I could find a few Huxley spray bottles in the general vicinity. I never got a chance, though.

After saying “hello” enough times to feel like an idiot, the smell caught me. It was the smell of unwashed bodies and urine and semen and body hair wrapped up in clothes that were far too warm for the weather. Most of all, it smelled like a set-up and a trap. I was kicking myself thoroughly when the butt of a hunting knife crashed down on my undefended scalp and interrupted all of my self-loathing.

“Hello there, little piggy. Feeling sore?”

The voice came from a junkie-looking white youth in thermal long johns. His hair was long and so too was his beard. Neither looked particularly clean, and his long johns were soiled here and there. Behind him, a couple was fucking.

“What brings you to my house, little pig?”

“The hair on your little chinny chin chin.”

“Not funny enough, douchebag.”

He got up out of his chair and slapped me a few times. They weren’t strong slaps, but they hurt all the same. His free movements made me realize how restricted mine were. I was duct taped to a wooden desk chair that was straight out of my middle school years. The chair itself was not bolted to the ground, so at least I had that going for me. Still, if I was to escape, I’d not only have to fight off O’Dell (or who I assumed to be O’Dell), but also his cronies, which were about seven in number. I doubted the lovebirds would put up any resistance, but I wasn’t sure either.

“You’ve puked a few times since you’ve been out, you know?”

“How can you tell in this place?”

“You talking shit about my place, boosie?”

“Far from it. It looks to me like the top of the line in shitholes.”

“Just for that, you’re owed a few more smacks. That can wait, however. I want to know why you’re looking for Angie.”

“Is that what you call her? You friend told me that he didn’t know her.”

“Sid looks out for me; he’s a good soldier.”

Sid was standing by the corner with a knife in his nails. He was trying hard to focus on cleaning, but his lowered head made him all the more conspicuous.

“Sid does what I tell him to. Plus, he’s got enough native intelligence to know to not spill to a cop.”

“I am not a cop, you animals. I’m a locator.”

“Same difference, man. You’re still invading our space, and we don’t like that. We also don’t like it when an outside piece of bacon comes asking for one of our own.”

“You’re telling me that Angela Ross runs with you guys?”

I looked around at our audience. They were all emaciated Huxley freaks with rotten clothes and horrible hygiene. If the city were a mouth, they’d be dead teeth. Cancerous one and all.

“Yeah, I am. Well, she was anyway.”

“You mean to tell me she’s gone?”

“More or less.”

“Let me guess, Angela Ross ran off a day or two ago, and this is your weird way of telling me that you want me to locate her.”

“Fuck no. What gave you that stupid idea?”

“It’s just been happening a lot lately. Figured that you guys couldn’t come up with a new idea.”

“You’ve got a mouth for a dude taped down to a chair.”

“I once tested positive for insubordination.”

“That’s probably the only test you ever passed, because you’re a failure. You know that? You’re a fucking failure.”

“Pretty strong words coming from a man in an adult onesie.”

“You know what makes it worse? You think you’re smart, don’t you? You really thought that you could just find Angela, didn’t you?”

“What can I say? I am a dreamer.”

“This is a fucking nightmare then, because Angela’s dead. We killed and ate her a long time ago. The bitch kept taking my Huxley stash in order to sell it for cheaper, plus she kept eating all the rations like the disgusting pig that she was. We taught her a lesson, me and Sid.”

Sid put the knife down and held it in the palm of his hand. He brought the knife hand close to me so I could see the stains on it. They looked like dried blood.

“She squealed loud as hell when Sid first stuck her. I took a hatchet to her dome just to shut her up. After that, we cut her up in the sink downstairs, and boiled her. Only me and Sid could stomach it, so we ate like kings for days and days. It hurt like hell to shit out, though.”

I took a lot for me to keep the vomit back. I could feel it working its way on my raw throat before I forced it back down again. For some reason I didn’t want to puke in front of these goons again. If I did, it’d feel like I had acknowledged defeat somehow.

“It looks to me like to just got yourself into trouble for nothing. You realize that, don’t you?”

“Yeah, so why don’t you let me go then. I can’t do any damage to you.”

“Nuts on that. What about telling the police? You can certainly do that if you’re up and about and free as a bird.”

“Why should I care about the police? I took this job as a favor. I don’t care about the girl or the police, and I certainly don’t give a damn about your little drug operation here.”

“You think that’s going to convince me of anything? That’s just your word, guy. The only way that I am going to let you go is if I can be

guaranteed that you aren't gonna talk."

"I got an idea," Sid chimed in from behind me. "Let's take him out for a walk in the country. You know, get some fresh air."

"Sid always has the best ideas. Don't you just love the way he thinks, copper?"

"He's a real cute kid."

"You like that?" Sid inched the knife close to my nose. The violence of his hand gesture threw me back a little, so he grabbed my hair and pinned me to the chair's headrest.

"Let's pretend that he does. Show him what you do best, Sid."

Sid took the knife and stabbed my right cheek. Then, after the knife was almost touching my molars, he started making a large red line. The blood pumped well, and by the time that I had a road completed on my face, Sid's hands looked like they were wearing vermillion gloves.

They put me in a car with a piece of a shirt for a bandage. I bled viciously on the drive out of the city. They took a route that they knew to be safe. When we got to the checkpoint on Mercer Avenue, O'Dell handed the on duty officer three bottles of Huxley. He let us through, and soon enough we were out in the open country. They drove for about twenty minutes before they stopped the car and let me out. O'Dell put the car in reverse, turned it around, and went back towards the city. Sid threw my pistol out of the passenger side window almost as if it were a spent cigarette.

I grabbed the pistol (which carried eight bullets) and started looking for a shelter to hole up in. Unfortunately, the suburbs that used to be here had been leveled during the raids against PPD. Frameworks and the occasional stores were all I had to pick from. They had left my cellphone in my pants pocket. It vibrated and told me that a certain McAvoy was looking for my attention. No phone call, though—I only occasioned a text message from the old crab.

"Hey. Found Angela Ross. Her body was in the river/suicide...more than likely within the last twenty-four hours."

I put the phone back in my pocket. I was no longer certain that my phone was incapable of lying to me. Everyone else was; why can't a microchip?

It was just about dark when I found my sleeping quarters. I gave myself a deadline of dusk because I knew from experience that they like to swarm at night, so I wanted to get a roof or a cave so my ass wasn't entirely out in the breeze. What I found was an unconnected garage with a locking slide door. It had long-raised panels and just two windows that were in a fantail pattern. The windows gave a clear view to the outside world, but since there were no operating lights in the general vicinity, it was a moot advantage. The inside of the garage was completely vacated. There was a general residue of formerly occupied spaces, and that fact made my first night on the cold concrete all the more difficult.

I dreamed for the first time in a long time during that first night. In the dream I had been a blind sloth slouching his way from tree limb to tree limb. I often missed whole roots, and tumbling was a common occurrence for my spirit animal. After a particularly dramatic flub, I hit the ground hard and rolled over on my back. When I did this, I saw that there were no trees. In actuality, there had never been any trees or any branches. Somehow I knew it all to be a lie. The truth hit me a like a gut punch from left field. It shook me up so bad that I made the final decision to lay there and wait for death. A very slow death.

I went out looking for food that morning and came up empty. In between scrounges, I sent out texts and calls to all my known acquaintances. It was a small list, full of people who couldn't be bothered. I tried McAvoy several times with no results. I cursed him and the city for being too busy for life-saving. I screamed and hollered at my screen. I threw the phone once, then, like a faithful dog, I went and retrieved it for no particular master. After calling Craig Doyle, I noticed that my phone's battery was near death. I turned it off to save it in case of an emergency. I laughed when those words came unthinkingly out. I hadn't yet accepted the sloth's view on life.

I went to sleep hungry that night. I spent many nights in the garage hungry. After a while, I became only a stomach—a stomach that on the best of days tried to fill itself with water in lieu of food. And then there were those days when water wasn't even readily available; air was called in for overtime duty. I tried to eat grass a few times, but could never push it down. I walked a lot, but never too far away from my place of habitation. Even though I

hadn't seen them yet, I lived in constant fear of them. I knew that if they found me, it would be curtains.

So, that's how I lived for a long period of time. Sometimes I got lucky. There was one day when I found a bird's nest. I took the bird's eggs, then found a prime hunting place to wait for the momma bird. She was a blue jay—a big, mean bitch with the most beautiful plumage. I aimed and fired not once, not twice, but three times. I missed all three before I realized that I was not only down to five shots, but my bullets might have just awoken them, wherever they were.

I cooked the eggs using the BIC lighter that I always carried, despite the fact that I didn't smoke. My old man had told me once that fire was essentially an extension of the human body, and that making fires for cooking and warmth were the most human things that a person could do. I guess I started carrying that BIC on the off chance that I'd finally prove my dear old pop right.

I put the flame under the two eggs and waited for them to brown. When they did, I devoured them whole. They tasted hot and rancid. I could feel nearly formed bodies crunching between my teeth. The little bird faces and feathers were ground to gristle in my starving jowls. I felt like a monster, and I wondered what the bird kingdom thought of me. Did they regard me, a human being, as one of them? I knew I wasn't, but maybe to a blue jay mother who had just watched as I ate her young fetuses like Cronos gone ape shit, I was no better than them. The thought made me wince.

I spent days afterwards sick, deathly sick. I vomited a lot, which is an especially painful exercise on an empty stomach. After what seemed like months, my garage was full of puke—its sickly sweet odor and its swirling matrix of unnaturally meshed together colors. I had nothing to clean it all up with, so I spent many nights sleeping in puke; thinking about George Orwell and his empty stomach in Paris and London. I compared myself to him and decided that my situation was exponentially worse. I cried a lot—the first time in ages.

On my first day of being less sick (being "healthy" was no longer an option), I saw her in the trees that bordered a ridge line. I was still delirious then, incapable of cogent thoughts. I never doubted that what I was seeing wasn't real. It was her and she existed. I crawled up close to her and got on my belly behind some bushes. I stared at her black hair and her nut brown

skin. Her arms were sculpted and cultivated, but were not like a man's; not butch in any way. I watched as her taut back pulsated up and down. She was alive! I closed my eyes and smelled her. I started to move out of concealment. I got close to her and said "hello." She didn't respond and I couldn't bring myself to touch her; I didn't want to make the Old Testament mistake of getting too close to divinity. I retreated and went back to the garage. I was still very weak and almost starved, but I had just seen Magdalena Cortez—I was vindicated, I was a locator once again.

The next morning I couldn't find her, so I masturbated while thinking about her. Somehow sex was far removed from my action. It was more of a holy offering, a sick token of devotion from a terribly sick man. I didn't clean up the discharge; it became just another stain. I did this for a few days in a row, still never giving up hope that I'd find her again. I still wasn't the sloth.

The second time I saw her, she was near the river that was well over five miles from the garage. I was filling my mouth with dirty, contaminated water when I saw her on the other bank. She was seated with her back to me. I jumped in the river in order to get to her side. She didn't move. I worked up the courage (which was based in absolute desperation) to touch her, and I placed my hands timidly on her shoulders. I then stroked her hair like a doll. She never moved, but her body spoke to me in Spanish somehow. I didn't understand a word, but I moaned and howled as my hands massaged every inch of her back and shoulders. I never once thought of touching her breasts or even her face. To me then, she was nothing but a back and a turned face. I didn't want to figure out what that face looked like then, but my omission began to haunt me as the nights progressed. Feeling her had made me feel like a man again, and when I feel like a man, I feel like a locator. A locator seeks answers from questions and riddles. I had always loved the experience of finding someone given up for dead, and Magdalena had been as good as dead for a long time. I would lay sleepless on my cum and vomit-filled concrete floor, thinking about the conundrum of Magdalena Cortez.

I couldn't figure it out. My deductive skills had atrophied. I was lost without a thought, and it made me hate her. I would rub my gun at the thought of her seated back, which I now knew hid a horrible visage. I knew that she had become one of them. I knew that I had to kill her for my sake

and for Craig Doyle, that pathetic worm of a man. I went hunting for her for days. There were nights when I slept out in the open because I no longer cared about them. I had become them in a sense because my only drive and my only impulse was to kill.

I found her for the last time in an open field. She was seated in the middle of the open grass with her back towards me. I very calmly pointed the pistol at her and fired twice from about six yards away. She didn't budge and I didn't see blood, so I got up to point blank range and pulled the trigger two more times. My last shot had been released from a muzzle that was embedded in Magdalena's occipital bone. Again, there was nothing that happened at all. I put the gun away and made myself supine right behind the woman I had just tried to murder. I consciously tried to not look at her, because I finally knew then that if I did, I wouldn't see anything. I stared at the trees instead. There were no trees, so I watched as that morning's fog rolled in. I thought about how I didn't know what season it was, but it felt like early spring--the nicest time to be out in the country. I stayed like that for a while. I was so engrossed in watching the nothing that surrounded me that I was slow to recognize that the nothing was full, with absolutely no vacancies. They were in the field with me. I could hear their God-awful moans and their shuffled gaits. I could smell the reek of death on them. I never saw them though; I kept my eyes on my cell phone and the gun, which now only had one bullet left.

My phone, which was so close to death that its screen was opaque with a gray haze all over it, contained a text message from Craig Doyle. It was a simple confession, and it read:

"Luke, I am so sorry but I have to tell you that I made it all up. Magdalena Cortez never existed she never lived below me she isn't real! I am sorry but I am so lonely. You are the only person I can see. Forgive."

I let the phone die. I then picked up the pistol and thought about slow versus fast. I then realized that my slow option was unknown and might not be slow at all. I put the pistol to my temple and squeezed. As the bullet ripped my brain in two, it had all just begun to make sense.

A Plague Girl's New Home

Eric Keys

I was pretty amazed Japheth got her into the shack and tied up before she woke up. Of course, it was amazing that he managed to kill all her friends and knock her out in the first place. Sure, Japheth got the drop on them, but they had guns and knew how to use them and Japheth was just another plague kid with a beat-up bow he found in the muck. But we had inside information and that goes a long way. George told me where the men with guns would be. He even told me which one Japheth should go after first.

I have to admit I was a little jealous. He was clearly smitten with this city girl. His hands seemed gentle with her as he checked the bonds. She was pretty. Her skin looked soft. She looked soft.

He grunted at me, expecting me to know what he wanted me to do. I had no idea but I didn't really care, so I just let him walk off without asking. I stared at her a bit. She woke up a few minutes later.

"It stinks like death in here. Who are you? What do you want from me?" she asked.

"My name's Rachel," I said.

"And your friend?"

"His name's Japheth," I said.

"Plague kids?" she asked.

"I reckon so," I said. "My parents died quick but I didn't catch it. Neither did Japheth. We try to stay away from the other plague kids. Japheth says they wouldn't be very gentle with a girl like me."

"I'm here to help you. Please untie me," she said.

"Slow down there, Ma'am. Why should I untie you when I don't even know who you are?"

"I'm sorry, Rachel. I'm here because the disease that killed your parents - Jones-Feinberg syndrome - is under control. We have treatments now and we're testing a vaccine. There's no reason to hide. It was a stroke of dumb luck that it didn't destroy civilization, but it's over."

"And your name?" I felt it was wrong that she knew mine and I didn't know her's.

"I'm sorry. I was very rude. My name is Dr. Amanda Fellen."

"What do you want, Dr. F?" I asked.

"A lot of kids are running around out here with no parents or adults to help them. Some of you are sick, but not many. Jones-Feinberg syndrome isn't as easily contracted by children. But a lot of you have been injured or gotten other diseases in the last few months. Me and my friends came to find and help you."

"Why do kids not get the disease?" This had been on my mind for months.

"Some of you do, just not many. You see, the way the virus that causes the disease works is... Wait, I don't have time to explain all this," said Dr. F.

"You think I'm stupid."

"It's not that, honey, it's just that... Well, there's a lot of background information to cover. To go into all the details even if you had advanced training in biology would take a long time."

I kind of shrugged, I guess. I figured she was done talking. I didn't have my answer but I had a feeling George would make it clear to me if I needed to know. So I decided it might be time to forage a bit. George had told me there were some great berry patches that none of the other plague kids had found. There used to be a hornet's nest that kept the kids away but George told me the nest was destroyed in a big thunderstorm the other day and it should be safe.

As I started to head out, Dr. F started talking again. "Japheth isn't much of a friend, right? He keeps you here, right? Threatens you if you leave, right? Says you're safe with him, I bet. Do you really think he can protect you?" she asked.

"He killed your friends and got you back here, right?"

"Just dumb luck. He happened to surprise us."

"Maybe, maybe not," I said, "but he isn't the one who really protects me."

Right on cue, George started stirring. I guess Dr. F hadn't even noticed the curtain. We put it up because, well, George ain't too easy on the eyes.

Dr. F. got very still when she heard George shifting around. "Who's there?" she asked in a whisper.

"My friend. The one who protects us," I said. I went over to the curtain and pulled it aside.

Dr. F. screamed when she saw him. He's pretty icky, it's true. The plague had done a number on him. Most of his skin was gone. His eye-lids

were gone. That was what always got me. Staring at you even when he was asleep. Red as the devil except for those black bits. His teeth were mostly still there, but they were all stained and broken. You could see some of his bones and organs, too. He looked right out of a zombie movie but worse. And he smelled like he never used the outhouse.

After a minute or two, Dr. F. got her head back on straight. "I'm amazed he's still alive. I've never seen anyone survive Jones-Feinberg syndrome to such a stage. My guess is that he's brain dead, though. How does he protect you?"

"He tells me things. Where to find food. Where the other plague kids are setting up camp or ambushes. How to avoid problems. He told me to tell Japheth where to find you and how to get you," I said.

"He can't tell you anything, Rachel. He's just a husk."

"Don't be so sure," I said with a grin. I filled his bowl full of mashed roots. It takes me a long time to mash them to the point where he can eat them without choking. It's a disgusting sight watching him choke and a dirty job getting the food out of him, so I'm real careful. I start spooning the mush in his mouth and he eats it.

"Just reflexes, honey. He's a vegetable. It's amazing he can even breathe."

"I wonder if you might not know as much as you think," I said with a shrug. I fed George a few more bites until he made it clear he was done. Dr. F. didn't say anything else. I could tell she was thinking hard about how to get out of here. I suspected she didn't like the idea of being so close to George, but she's the one who said the plague wasn't a big deal anymore, so I let her sit there as I went out to find those berries.

It was almost dark when I got back and Dr. F. was asleep in the chair. She looked powerfully uncomfortable and I thought about untying her, but George told me not to. I hadn't seen Japheth since he brought Dr. F. here, but that wasn't unusual. I didn't have much to do and wanted to be rested for whatever Japheth had in mind, so I figured I'd take a nap.

I dreamed about George. I heard his voice. It was more real than when I'm awake. When I'm awake, it's more like nudges, images, impressions... But in this dream he had a voice. A beautiful voice. Strong. Just hearing him speak sent waves of terror and pleasure through my body. I couldn't see him, jut hear him.

"I love you, Rachel," he said.

"Are you Jesus?" I asked. I didn't know why I asked that. I guess the strength of his voice made me think he could have been a god.

"Don't be quick to put names on me, Rachel. I am your Secret Lover. I am The Secret Lover. That is the title for you to use for now. I may show you another name later."

I thought about that for a bit. I figured I could always call him L as a nickname.

"Rachel," he said after a moment, "soon I am going to ask you do to something. It will seem weird, but you need to trust me."

Then I felt him touch me. I can't describe it. It was like being torn to pieces and then rebuilt. Pain and pleasure. Intoxicated sobriety. Every lie in the world poured in one end and out of me came streams of truth. I wish I had been a poet.

And then that bitch Dr. F woke me up. I opened my eyes to see her hovering over me. She was not in the chair anymore. Her clothes were ripped a bit and she was covered in blood. I figured it wasn't her own.

"Come with me," she said.

"Where's Japheth?" I asked.

"He's dead. He tried to rape me. He's strong for a plague kid. Just dumb luck I happened to find this during the struggle," she said as she held up some piece of wood. It had a metal bolt or spike in it. In the lamplight I could see some pieces of Japheth still attached to the metal.

"You keep talking about dumb luck, Dr. F. Maybe it isn't dumb luck that is doing all these things," I said.

"No time for metaphysics. You're coming with me," she said.

I heard my Secret Lover whispering in my ear. It was much clearer than it had been in the past. "Can I say goodbye to George?" I asked.

"Don't be ludicrous. He can't understand you."

"But I love him," I said. I pulled the curtain back and saw the body sitting there. His eyes had a life they hadn't in the past. Maybe George was brain dead, but I could tell My Secret Lover was in there. He was reminding me to trust him.

I leaned in and kissed him, like the way I kissed Japheth. His tongue responded but almost fell apart in my mouth. I could taste the half-chewed food and even some bits of his cheek in my mouth. Tangy, salty, warm.

Dr. F started yelling something as I began to stroke George/L's cock through the tidbits of cloth that might have once been pants. I could feel

him getting hard. Dr F. was threatening or pleading with me or something. I couldn't tell and didn't care. I took his cock in my mouth and I felt myself transported.

I felt the gush of cum and blood in my mouth and I heard L's moans reverberate through my head as an orgasm like I had never had ripped through my body.

After what might have been five seconds or five years, I finally stood up. I must have looked a sight! I was covered in cum and blood and pieces of flesh. What once was George had literally fallen to pieces when I was done. But I knew L wasn't in there because I could still hear him in my head, whispering songs of love.

I turned and saw Dr. F. Her mouth was open, gaping even. Tears were streaming down her face. Disgust? Fear? I don't know. But she ran.

L told me to follow him. I followed the sound of his voice which was both inside me and outside me. "I was never George. He was just a body I used. I'll use others from time to time. I need to show you something."

He led me up a little hill and told me to wait quietly. Just as dawn was breaking I saw Dr. F. run into a clearing at the bottom of the hill. She was being chased by some plague kids. They were playing with her. She was surrounded but couldn't see it. I could though, from the top of the hill.

Eventually, they closed in on her. They killed her, but not fast. I wanted to turn away but L said, "Keep looking. I wish I could protect you from this but you need to see. Dr. Fellen thought that since the plague had been defeated that things would get better. They won't, Rachel. Not for a while. But I will be with you. I will help you. I will help you find others. I am their Secret Lover, too. But don't be jealous. Each of you is shimmering and unique and infinitely precious to me. We will be a small number, but we will do great things. Sometimes they will be hard things. Sometimes even brutal. But they will be beautiful, like you."

The Stench of Gold

Michael Lindquist

Oskar Almberg’s dream of a new and better life in America didn't turn out in quite the way he had hoped. Like so many others, he had left the poverty and famine of Sweden, crossing the ocean to the mythical *Land of opportunity*. Arriving in the spring of 1891, just a day after he turned sixteen, he worked hard to make ends meet. But no matter how much and how hard he worked, the American Dream seemed further and further away each passing day. The only thing that came easy was learning the language. As the new century approached, Oskar had resigned himself to an average life. He worked, he drank, he slept. He did not dream anymore.

"Davey left yesterday," said Jonathan, and took a long swig of his beer. "Got a case of the ol' gold fever and left for Alaska."

"Gold?" Oskar rolled his eyes and sighed. "That fool's not gonna find any. He'll be back by next winter. Even poorer than before, I bet."

"Maybe you should go too, Oskar." Jonathan threw him the newspaper across the table. "Seems your people just got lucky."

The headline of the day was 'THE THREE LUCKY SWEDES', the story of another big gold find in Alaska, this one by a few of his countrymen. As Oskar read, the loud talking and laughing that filled the bar around them was slowly drowned out by the sound of his own heart beating louder and louder.

"That got you dreaming, didn't it?" said Will, and patted him on the back.

Oskar didn't answer, just continued reading, completely lost in the story. He felt a tiny little spark in the back of his mind. Maybe it was his time. Maybe 1899 would be his year. The luxuries and wonders that might come in the 20th century would be his to own. Apparently, one of The Three was in fact Norweigan, so maybe Oskar could be the third *actual* Swede who got lucky? One final try at the Dream. He stood up, bid farewell to his friends without looking at them, and left.

"We'll see you by next winter, then," shouted Jonathan, as Oskar went out the door. "Give my regards to Davey if you meet him."

The town that had formed near The Three Lucky Swedes' discovery was called Nome. Thousands of other men had been drawn there by the same dream and desire as Oskar, making the town grow rapidly. Calling it a *town* might be a bit of an overstatement, consisting more of a vast number of tents along the coast than actual buildings. It did have some shops and even a saloon though, since the men still wanted to drink and gamble. The few women in town were mostly prostitutes, competing for the men's attention with the seductive allure of the gold itself.

As Oskar approached Nome, and the seemingly endless rows of tents filled his view, he felt a creeping discomfort spread through his body. Something was very wrong here. The town had a revolting stench about it. Not just the stench of prospectors forsaking hygiene for the constant search for riches. Not the stench of horses relieving themselves anywhere they pleased. This was something else. A smell unlike anything he had felt before. He frowned and his nose twitched, reacting instinctively as it got stronger and stronger.

When the first big gold rushes started, Oskar had heard an old man claim that he could actually *smell* gold. One of many people who seemed to think that they had any more of a clue than anyone else where to find gold. The truth was, none of them knew anything. They were all searching blindly. But maybe Oskar himself really could smell gold, and this was it?

Maybe this is the smell of gold, he thought, *and it stinks worse than shit.*

It was the middle of winter, and the ground was covered in a thick layer of snow. Something bothered him about that, and it took a while to figure it out.

No footprints.

It looked as if no-one had been outside their tent all day. That might be logical if there was a full blizzard going on, but there wasn't a single falling snowflake, and the wind was almost unnoticable. He couldn't hear anything either. Not even a hint of talk or laughter coming from anywhere. Nome was supposed to be a gold town, not a ghost town. It was almost noon, so they couldn't all be sleeping, could they?

"Hello?" he shouted. "Is there anyone here?"

There was no response. Oskar walked on, searching the maze of settlements, when he finally heard something. A weird noise coming from inside one of the tents. He walked over, and carefully pulled up the flap,

hoping that he wouldn't just catch a couple having sex. But there was only a single person in there. An unshaven, long-haired man in muddy clothes and worn-out boots.

He was down on all fours, coughing and heaving, throwing up. But the stuff that was coming out of his mouth wasn't regular vomit. It was a thick liquid that flowed almost gracefully from his mouth, glistening in a warm, mesmerizing glow.

The man was vomiting *gold*.

Then, as if that wasn't unbelievable enough, gold started to drip from his eye sockets. He looked up at Oskar, who gasped as he saw the man's eyes. They were pure gold. No whites, no irises, no pupils, just bright, shiny gold. By now, a big pool of it was spreading out on the ground beneath the man, as if he was bleeding to death. He collapsed, dying in what must have been a small fortune.

Oskar knelt down and gently touched it. The gold was thick and sticky, but still in liquid form. He was far from an expert, but he was pretty sure that liquid gold was supposed to be really goddamn hot. This was just slightly warmer than body temperature. He held his fingers up to his nose, and smelled the gold that covered them.

It stank.

The actual gold really did stink worse than shit.

He reached over and felt the man's skin. It was cold and hard like metal. He tapped the man's forehead, making a sound like an empty tin can.

"As if touched by King Midas himself," Oskar whispered to himself.

Dazed and unsure of what to do, he backed out of the tent. As he stepped outside, he bumped into something behind him. Even before he turned around, he already knew that it was a man. Oskar jerked back at the sight of him, at least seven feet tall, seemingly suffering from the same affliction as the man in the tent. His eyes glistened in the sunlight, and glowing tears ran from the corners of them, as if he was crying gold.

"What the hell is going on?" Oskar screamed, right in the man's face.

"Greed," said the tall man. "The greed's come for us all."

The tall man stumbled, and Oskar instinctively moved out of his way. He fell forward, right on the tent, making the whole thing collapse. There was a final guttural moan muffled by the tent's fabric, before he stopped moving. Gold trickled out in a thick stream from his ears, running down over the tent, and forming pools on either side. It glowed like hot lava, as

spell-binding as the naked body of a woman. Like all of Oskar's ancestors back to the dawn of man, he was transfixed by the beauty of this metal. It would be rather fitting for gold to stink, considering the greed and animosity that it brought out even in the best of men. It had started so many fights and wars, poisoned the minds of so many, and ended the lives of the ones that got in their way.

He moved on, and as he came farther into the town, bodies started to appear on the ground.

This is probably not what people mean when they talk of streets being paved with gold, thought Oskar.

All of them were lying in pools of gold, dead as doornails. *Very expensive doornails.* A few of the tents had splatters here and there on the canvas, as if people had thrown up on them before they died.

"Jävla helvete," he muttered.

"Mind your mouth, honey," said a girl's voice behind him. "I might not understand that language, but I know a curse word when I hear one."

He turned around, and was relieved to finally see someone alive and unaffected. By the look of her dress and make-up, he guessed - *correctly* - that she was a prostitute. Most of the prostitutes he had seen before in his life had looked a bit rough and worn-out, but this girl was a breathtaking teenage angel. She was a light shade of brown, the result of several affairs between slaves and their owners in her ancestry. Her eyes were the darkest he had ever seen, and her pitch-black hair shined like satin.

"How long have you been standing there?" he asked.

"Long enough to hear you talk to yourself, honey," she said.

"Do you know what the hell happened here?" he asked.

"Gold fever, I guess," she said. "Not just regular ol' greed, this be an actual *fever*. A curse from God, I reckon. Greed's one o' them deadly sins, ain't it?"

"I don't think all the people here were greedy enough to deserve this. But He works in mysterious ways, as they say. And this is definitely the most mysterious thing I've ever seen."

"Honey," she said. "I don't think *mysterious* is the right word for this."

"My name's Oskar," he said. "Not *honey*."

"Yeah, you're too pale to be honey. I'm Josephine."

Josephine wore a white blouse, so thin it was almost see-through, with nothing underneath. Oskar tried in vain not to stare at the clear outline of

her breasts showing through it.

"See anything you like?" she said.

He panicked, and looked away. "Sorry."

"Damn," she said. "Even when you blush, you're still pale as a damn snowman. You should have a carrot for a nose."

He realized that her hands and arms were drenched in gold up to the elbows, and took a step back.

"Relax," she said. "It's not my..."

She trailed off, unsure whether to say gold or blood or something else. Oskar had the same thought, and finished her sentence. "...whatever it is?"

"Can you feel the smell?" he asked. "The smell of the gold?"

"This shit's the smell of gold?" She raised an eyebrow. "I would've thought that gold would smell nice. Like an expensive perfume or something. It should smell as beautiful as it looks, don't you think?"

"No," he said. "It *stinks*. At least this gold does."

Josephine nodded, not really understanding what Oskar was talking about. She looked at the bodies around them.

"I tried to take care of 'em," she said, her voice cracking. "Really, I did."

Tears appeared in the corners of her eyes. *Regular* tears this time, thank God.

"It's not your fault, Josephine," said Oskar. "I don't think anything can be done about this."

He walked over and hugged her. She squeezed him so tight he lost his breath for a moment.

Maybe this is a curse, he thought. *A punishment for the colonizer's raping and pillaging of the New World.*

"When did this start?" he asked.

"Just a few days ago," she said. "It goes really fast."

"Do you know where it came from?"

"The first one I know that got it was Howard. Nice man, he was. Had a fiancé he loved more than life itself waiting for him back home, so we only just talked whenever he... you know... *visited* me. Nothing else."

She looked at Oskar, and realized that he wasn't really interested in the life story of Howard Dern from Texas. His eyes clearly said *'Get to the point, girl'*. That was the problem. He had only just gotten here, so he didn't know all these people here. They were just dead bodies to him. It might be

horrific, but it wasn't traumatic. Oskar had seen men dead and dying here, he hadn't seen *friends* dead and dying.

"Anyway," she said. "Howard came back from the woods one day, all covered in that gold stuff. Everyone was all amazed that it was all runny and sticky. That ain't what gold's supposed to be like. Then, after about a day, he..."

Josephine grimaced, trying to remain calm. She didn't want to tell Oskar that she had seen it. That Howard had been talking to her just as the first tears of gold ran from his eyes. That he had vomited all over her dress, and then collapsed in her lap. That his back had ripped open, and his spine and intenstines had burst out, painted in gold. She was right there, so she was supposed to have been the second one to go, shouldn't she?

Why would God spare a girl like me? she wondered. *I ain't never done anything right in my life.*

Her eyes went blank as she managed to get her emotions under control.

"You've seen what happens to 'em," she said. "When you get it, you go quick. Just me and Miranda left, that I know of. Pretty big place this, don't know every nook and cranny."

She led him farther into Nome, their path paved with so many bodies that she and Oskar had to step over, and sometimes on top of, them. It looked like a battlefield, with too many dead to count. Each one had a grimace of absolute terror on their face, as the gold - *or whatever it was* - had pushed itself out through every orifice possible.

"How did you end up here, anyway?" asked Oskar.

"That's a long story," said Josephine.

"I've crossed an *ocean*. I know about long stories."

Some of them only seemed to have choked on a small amount of vomit, while others were covered from head to toe in pure, flawless gold. A few of the completely golden ones were standing up, frozen in agonizing poses, shining like priceless statues.

"You ever been to New Orleans?" she asked.

"No, never been outside New York until now, actually."

"New Orleans's where my story starts," said Jospehine, "and if I'm lucky, that's where it'll end someday."

The gold chimed and shimmered, enchanting like a siren's song. There was an almost sensual aura about the golden people. Oskar didn't know whether to be sick, or admire them. It was beautiful and horrific at the same time, repulsion and awe overlapped and merged in his mind.

Is this Hell or El Dorado? he wondered. *Or are they the same thing?*

He imagined Josephine as one of the statues, with gold slowly running down her naked skin, covering her entire body. She would freeze in a graceful pose, without a scratch or blemish for thousands of years, like a sculpture of some Incan fertility goddess.

"Here's where us girls live," said Josephine, as she led him inside a large tent. "Or used to live."

When they stepped in, the stench of gold was drowned out by a strong smell of perfume. Had this been under regular circumstances, Oskar would have thought it was overbearing - *maybe even annoying* - but right now it was heaven. Lying on a big pile of colourful blankets and pillows was a girl, just as young and beautiful as Josephine, but red-haired and almost paler than Oskar himself. She looked close to death, but did not have any traces of gold on her yet.

"Just like you, Josephine," said the red-haired girl with a weak smile, failing to hide her pain. "I let you out of my sight for a minute, and you've already got a new boyfriend."

"Very funny, Miranda," said Josephine, and kneeled next to the girl. "He just got here. Doesn't seem to have caught the gold yet. Name's Oskar."

"Come here, Oskar," said Miranda. "I won't bite. *Not yet*, anyway."

Her face was blank, giving no indication whether or not that was a joke. He walked over and sat down.

"You're gonna be fine," she said, and stroked his cheek. "God's spared you. I'll not be as lucky, me, being a creature of lust and sin."

"I've got plenty of lust and sin in me too," said Josephine. "If that's the reason, I should be suffering same as you."

There is no way God would have spared me for anything, thought Oskar.

A thin stream of gold ran from the corner of Miranda's mouth. She moaned seductively, and licked her lips, smearing the gold.

"It's coming," she said. "The greed's coming for me."

There was a nagging, terrifying thought throbbing in the back of Oskar's mind. An unbelievable thought. He shook his head as if trying to

physically throw it off. But it was still there, growing louder and stronger. It was ridiculous, but true.

"Alive," he said out loud. "The goddamn gold is *alive*."

"The hell does that mean?" said Josephine.

Gold started to came out from all parts of Miranda's body, as tears running down her cheeks, merging with drool from the corners of her mouth, bleeding from wounds on her arms and legs, and leaking from her nipples, staining the dress.

The flow increased, and soon it was pouring out of her in thick streams, covering her skin like paint. She lunged at Oskar, knocking him to the ground. He tried to get up, but she straddled him and held his arms with an incredible strength. She ripped up her top, exposing her breasts, now completely covered in gold.

"What are you d -" Oskar managed, before she pulled him violently to her chest, smothering him.

Miranda's gold didn't stink. It smelled intoxicating, like the luxurious perfume Josephine had imagined. Was she the only one who did that, or was the gold changing? Was it evolving, adapting, trying to get to him too? It had definitely taken an inviting shape. Oskar was filled with an overwhelming sense of calm, as if he just wanted to give in. The gold on Miranda's breasts smeared all over his face, and he felt it try to push itself inside him through every pore. Something was holding it back. Maybe God really was protecting him, or maybe it was just plain old blind luck.

He could hear Josephine screaming, pleading with Miranda to stop, to let him go. He wasn't sure if he wanted her to let him go. She dug her sharp nails into his head, and pulled him in even tighter. It was as if she - *or it* - had given up trying to infect him, and now just wanted to suffocate him instead. Either way, it wanted him dead.

"Take my greed," whispered Miranda.

Oskar was right on the verge of passing out when he heard her scream and felt her body spasm. All her muscles went limp, and he was free. Groggy and seeing double, it took him a few moments before he could see what had happened. Miranda was lying on the floor with a big pickaxe lodged deep in her head. Thick globs of gold oozed from the wound. Josephine was crying and held Miranda as she took her final breaths. Oskar, still dazed and wobbly, crawled over to her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you," he said.

"Don't thank me for this!" she screamed and slapped him. "Never, ever thank me for this."

The slap brought him back to full clarity, and he grabbed her. She glared at him first, her eyes burning with hate and pain, and then collapsed in his arms.

"I'm sorry," she whimpered. "That wasn't her, you know. That wasn't Miranda. She would never do something like that. Whatever this goddamn shit is, it drives them insane."

"I know," he said. "We have to get out of here."

He pulled her up, and had to drag her out of the tent. He felt the greatest sense of relief he had ever or would ever feel in his life when he saw that there wasn't anyone else outside. Then his heart sank, almost stopped, when he heard a famillíar voice behind him call his name. The voice was frail and thin. He could hear it being muffled as gold was pouring up through the throat.

"That you, Oskar?"

Oskar didn't want to turn around. He already knew who it was, and he didn't want to see what he looked like now. He didn't want to see his friend leaking gold from every orifice, dying in agony. Josephine didn't turn around either, as if she could hear his thoughts. She held his hand as tight as she could, not knowing what to say.

"Davey," said Oskar, and looked down at the ground. "Please, not you too."

"Fucking Swedes." Davey started laughing, broken up by coughs. "I knew I couldn't trust you people."

"Shut up, Irish." Oskar winced, trying to hold back tears. "Just shut up."

He felt like a coward. Josephine had stayed with her friend until the end, holding her, even after being forced to kill her. She had faced her nightmare. Oskar didn't even have the guts to glance over his shoulder at his dying friend. Josephine dragged him away as they heard Davey collapse in the snow. Oskar hadn't allowed her to stay and mourn Miranda, so he couldn't stay and mourn Davey either.

He reached down, scooped up a handful of snow and rubbed it over his face, trying to clean off Miranda's gold. Josephine headed for the beach, looking as if she was sleepwalking, and took a few steps out into the water.

It was as cold as water can get without freezing, but she didn't notice. She just knelt down and started washing her arms. The gold was sticky, but came off after a while. The last few stubborn remains she had to scrape off with her nails.

"Will you ever go back home?" she asked, as she walked up to him. "*Home*-home, I mean. Back across the ocean?"

"I don't think so," he said. "Maybe."

"Well, you can't go home before you've been to New Orleans."

"Do they have gold there?"

"Not sure," said Josephine. "You wanna find out?"

The last lucky Swede and a girl from New Orleans walked away from Nome, as a few drops of gold on their clothes glimmered in the afternoon sun.

Purge

Mark Tompkins

A splitting headache forced Alicia from her restless dreams. Her throat was dry and she swallowed, painfully. *I'm still sick*...she swallowed again, testing the pain; it was still there…*and still alive. But, I think today is the day.*

Three months ago, she received a shipment of African fruit bats from Uganda for research purposes. Commissioned from the university, she was delighted to work with the little mammals and dove vigorously into her work. Not long after, her husband became ill, and three days later he was dead; his guts turned to mush. The loss was still painful, frighteningly so, and the current situation made it even worse. She'd heard time heals all wounds and knew that was a luxury she would not have. She turned her head to look out the window and pain lanced behind her eyes. She squinted against the daylight, her eyes adjusting, and gazed through the wooden slats at the street beyond.

Her husband worked at the Department of Motor Vehicles and shared the same air with approximately 1500 people that day. They were all dead now too, at least 94 percent of them were. With the highest mortality rate of any contagion in history, this mutant strain of the Marburg virus had decimated the population of Bossier City in only a few short months. Not all of the infected were dead. With a five day incubation period, it was possible, though not likely, to stay sick for weeks afterwards while the filo virus slowly devoured your internal organs. Death usually resulted from massive hemorrhaging. Of course, some people died within hours, it seemed the virus affected people differently.

A man stumbled by on the sidewalk just outside the window. He was close enough for her to see the snot and blood dripping from his nostrils. The consistency of tapioca pudding, each belabored breath misted it into the air. She wondered how it could have come to this in such a short amount of time. He passed from view, staring at the cement and she heard the sudden squeal of tires on the road. A loud "thump" reverberated through the wall as the man was hit by a car…or truck…she couldn't see outside to tell, but she knew what had happened all the same.

She tried to care, tried to conjure up a tear for the fallen man, but she didn't have it in her. She'd witnessed so much death she'd become numb to it. Muffled voices floated to her as someone asked the man if he was okay. Not from close up, she would have bet a million dollars on that one. People didn't get close to other people any more.

She could see the scene unfolding in her mind's eye. The man getting out of his car, unable to see from the gore covering his windshield, running towards the fallen man. Not too close, just enough to make himself feel better, as if he was really trying to help this diseased scourge. He may have done it out of pity, or to make sure the man was sick. If the man was truly sick, then the driver would reason it was okay, the man was going to die anyway and he probably did him a favor by making it quicker. If he wasn't sick, it really didn't matter much more anyway. But it wasn't okay, nothing was anymore. Millions of people were dying and the immune didn't know how to handle it. They were the blessed, yet felt the most lost in this new emerging world; a chrysalis birthing death, disease and sorrow.

She squeezed her eyes tighter, trying to dispel the mental pictures playing in her head. It didn't work…she imagined the driver discovering the remnants of the man in the ditch, dismembered, his bloated body sloughing apart from the impact. She knew he would feel a sense of relief that he'd not killed one of the few uninfected, they were the only people worth saving, they were the only ones that mattered anymore. The rest were doomed to die, percentages be damned, it was how the infected were seen. In this case, it was obvious the man was not going to make it.

"I'm sorry, so sorry," the man outside said before slamming his car door and tearing off down the street, windshield wipers trying to erase the evidence of the chance encounter.

It was a scene that was common nowadays. People didn't really walk anymore, they stumbled, like the zombies in those George Romero films. That's what the world looked like now, a zombie apocalypse, but these zombies were very much alive, waiting for a cure that would never come; there was no one left with the skill set to make it. These zombies would not walk the streets for ages, trying to satiate some unexplainable hunger for human flesh, most would not last the week. They were the real walking dead and they knew it.

Alicia opened her eyes and coughed up a wad of phlegm, thick and bloody, and her throat painfully objected. She was severely dehydrated and

needed water. She eased to the side of the bed, trying not to make any sudden movements, and put her feet on the floor…so far, so good. She braced herself and stood up, slowly, like in a slow motion replay, and a wave of dizziness threatened to topple her from her newfound heights. She closed her eyes, fighting the feeling, trying to regain composure and she sighed in relief when it came. She opened her eyes and began the slow walk to the kitchen. It was just around the corner, but it seemed like miles as she concentrated on putting one foot in front of another, marching to the beat of the drum in her head. For some reason, having something to focus on helped, even if it was the pain her heartbeat caused.

She opened the cabinet and pulled a glass from the shelf. It slipped from her weak grasp and shattered on the tile floor; a homemade claymore mine sending tiny shards of glass flying through the air, embedding in the white pasty flesh of her legs. There were only a few, but they hurt and she cursed herself for her clumsiness. Too weak to care, she pulled another glass from the shelf, this one safely tucked inside both clenched hands. She placed it in the sink and turned the faucet handles on. Nothing happened. She twisted them further and still no water.

"Damn," she croaked, her vocal chords rusty from disuse. "I'm so thirsty."

Realizing there would be no water from any of the faucets, she reached up to the shelf above the glasses. That was where the magic potions rested and she perused the labels, Ibuprofen, Acetaminophen, Nyquil… yeah, Nyquil, that helped everything. She pulled the bottle from the shelf and twisted the lid off, anxious for some sort of relief. She grabbed the Ibuprofen and spilled a few tablets on the counter. She picked up four of them, popped them in her mouth and tipped the Nyquil bottle back. It was half full and she drank all of it down, knowing it would only be a little while before it took effect, and she hoped it would be enough to make her feel a little better.

She knew what she had done was dangerous, at least it would be normally. She was infected now and it didn't really matter if she abused her kidneys anymore, they would be a bloody mass of useless tissue before long anyway. She didn't know how she had contracted the disease, for the last two months, she'd been immune, but she knew nature had a way of getting around immunization by the process of mutation. The virus had mutated, she didn't need a medical specialist to tell her that, she knew it because she

was now coughing up blood from her lungs. It had come around for revenge…for bringing it here, killing off everyone she knew before killing her too. It had made her watch first.

She knew she was dying and in a way, she was relieved. People always think they want to be the ones to live through Armageddon. To have the world to themselves and reset the laws of the land. She'd once been a staunch believer of that herself. But now that it was a reality, she was tired of seeing everyone around her die. Tired of stepping over dead bodies while people in white suits, coughing under their plastic bubble helmets, drug them into piles and pretended not to be sick. They would be next, white suits couldn't protect you from The Bossier Strain, nothing could.

That's what the news had come to calling it, The Bossier Strain, like some demented tribute to a bestselling novel. She shortened it and called it BS, but it wasn't an acronym for Bossier Strain. The media always had a flair for the dramatic, but in the end, they faded into black like the rest of humanity. People were too sick to go to work, there was no more news. What information there was came from the radio, from people hiding from society, claiming victory over The Bossier Strain, some claiming a government conspiracy had this coming a long time ago and it was a plan to wipe out 6 billion people and leave the world to the rich and famous. She though it ludicrous, but what did she know, she studied bats. She was sure there was a joke in there somewhere, but she couldn't grasp it right now. What she did know is that the Bossier Strain mutated, and if it did it once, it could do it again. She wasn't convinced the people on the other side of the radio were free and clear of anything, she'd thought so herself once.

She had learned this was not a local outbreak, it spread across the world like wildfire, destroying life by the billions, and she was the reason it happened. At first, she blamed herself, but soon she realized that nature had this bomb waiting the whole time, hiding out in the jungles, patient, the ultimate killer. If she hadn't unleashed hell on earth, someone else would have. Either way, it was inevitable and the world was destined to wind up in this state. Humans, the poster children for natural selection, who'd have thought?

The overdose of medicine began to calm her, numbing her senses, giving her the illusion of feeling better. It didn't matter, illusion or not, if it helped her get through the next few hours, she was happy with it. She looked out the kitchen window, hands braced on either side of the sink. A

series of coughs racked her body and she spattered blood on the window, staining her view with crimson spots. She didn't want to die inside, it was a beautiful day beyond the glass. If she was going to go, she would do it as much on her terms as she could.

She turned and walked to the front door, noticing it was open and only the screen stood between her and the last few moments of her life. Pain ripped through her abdomen as something gave way inside her and she dropped to her knees. She gasped and gripped her stomach with both hands, her breath coming in short bursts, like a mother performing Lamaze for a grisly birth. Warmth radiated from her crotch. Hunched over, she saw the blood seep from underneath her night shirt. She reached down, grabbed the hem and pulled it up, revealing her red panties. She didn't have any red panties, only white cotton, the sensible, comfortable ones. The front of her underwear bulged and she pushed on the puffy fabric. Blood seeped out, and ran down her legs, staining the floor with the remnants of her life. Her vagina and rectum were bleeding, something inside was terribly wrong and she was turning inside out.

Summoning her courage and will, she stood and stumbled outside. She turned her face to the sun, trying to ignore the intense pain. It seemed to emanate from everywhere in her body at once and she cried out, weak and ineffectual. Eyes closed and sobbing quietly, she raised her hands to the sky, crying bloody tears and letting the sun warm her. Blood left on her hands from touching her soaked panties ran down her arms, into her armpits and came to rest on her nipples, staining the front of her nightshirt. She shuffled towards the back of the house, pure will putting one foot in front of the other. She was death in comfortable clothes, the barely undead, lactating blood, beckoning you to drink from her swollen breasts. There was a bayou behind the house and she wanted to be in it when she passed.

Alligators lived in the bayou, as they did in almost every body of water in Louisiana, and this had kept her from swimming in the beautiful water for the entire time they lived on its tranquil banks. More pain, this time so intense she could not stay standing. She fell, clutching her abdomen again as vital organs ripped from their moorings, dissolving and flowing towards her body's orifices. She was a bag of blood, barely alive and not for long. She crawled towards the shore, out of reach but only a few feet away. Somehow she reached it and rolled into the brown stagnant water, dragging a crimson puddle with her.

Floating seemed to ease the pain, but it was still excruciating, overloading her senses, filling her with the desire to die and to die quickly. Why was it taking so long? She prayed for death to take her and somewhere, where prayers are usually heard and dismissed, never to be answered, this one was heard. A splash to her right drew her attention and she turned her head. Two eyes protruded above the water and a rough, scaly tail moved back and forth, propelling the alligator towards her in eerie silence. She'd never been so close to one and she thought it beautiful, an enduring example of nature's creation.

The alligator nosed close and in a flash, sprang into action. It opened its toothy maw and bit her abdomen, puncturing her skin and releasing the pool of blood that so recently had been formed into the shape of kidneys, lungs, a stomach, and many other organs. She didn't feel it, her pain sensors were already at maximum and could process no more, she was grateful and watched disconnected, as if viewing a film.

The alligator began its death roll, protective lenses covering its eyes as it twisted its body violently, finishing off its prey. Alicia's body thrashed and came apart at the seams, limbs flailing until coming free from the body. Other alligators rushed in from the banks to get their share of the diseased corpse, eager to feed on a fresh kill. The blood began to fade, mixing with the bayou water and was gone within a few moments. All traces of Alicia's existence were erased.

Weeks later, an alligator crawled up on shore, a dark red trail marking its passage. Blood flowed from its eyes and its body was swollen. It convulsed, throwing up a large swamp rat and some fish as it died. Behind it, several fish floated to the top of the water, shaking, splashing drops of water in small arcs that fell back to the swampy water, staining it red. The new apex predator was here to stay.

The Sentinel

Carl Thomas Fox

I am a Sentinel. My very being dictates that I am to be impartial, separated from the world, observing only.

Well, I guess I failed that. Must be why I am now wracked with pain as the virus is rampaging through my system.

As I have already said, I am a Sentinel. A being created by the higher beings located at the centre of the universe, watching over everything. They created five of us, moulding us from the DNA of several life forms, but making us look human to move among the humans. We were sent to watch and observe, to determine whether or not the humans deserve to share this universe with the millions of beings currently in union.

They decided no.

From their decision, they have started the mass genocide already. Ignoring the grinding pains in my abdomen, as my insides boiled and liquified, my cellular structure breaking down, I picked up the woman I have grown to love, Isabella, and carried her to a nearby car. She was also suffering, but with her being just human, it was striking her hard. Her entire body was shaking, burning to the touch. Every now and again, she convulsed as if receiving a powerful strike in the gut. Every time she did, a small splatter of bloody vomit sprayed out.

Placing her in the passenger seat, I slipped in and started the engine. Trying to focus, my eyesight beginning to deteriorate as the jelly of my eyes was pulsating, I drove through the streets and was met with a horrific sight.

People were staggering through the streets, affected by the virus that was potent, strong and highly contagious. It was travelling in the air, there was no escape. The very young and elderly were the first to litter the ground with death, still slightly writhing with the last flickers of life. A pool of boiling liquid was next to their bodies, where they had already vomited up their cooked insides. The broken bodies were like rag dolls, moving only when the main trunk shuttered from the gasping breaths. Their burning, reddened skin covered in pulsating black boils, which exploded spraying gangrenous green pus.

Those in between young and old were still struggling with life, only suffering the vomiting and convulsions. Some were still able to look up into the sky, looking at the smoking trails of the comets that sealed their doom.

Unable to focus, and the convulsions causing me to lose control, I am afraid I ran over some of the unfortunate dead, their jellying flesh crushing in an explosion under the wheels. I also hit some of those still walking, or staggering, with life, killing them faster, their blood smearing the windscreens. In horror, I watched everything, knowing I couldn't help them. I was not searching for help, or trying to find a way to stop this, there was no way.

As a Sentinel, my very memory serves as a computer drive. Everything I see, everything I hear, everything I think, is recorded. I am trying to get as much information as I could to prevent anything like this happening again.

Best if I start from the beginning.

***

The Sentinels were created because of an incident that should never have occurred. Life on Earth. You see, it was intended that Earth was not meant to evolve beyond what the humans refer to as the Hadean Era. A time when the planet was a mass of exploding volcanoes, storms and earthquakes.

It was meant as a prison.

But that was when the asteroid hit. The ancients had a habit of experimenting with different biological samples and bacteria, and the easiest way to transport them was on asteroids. Frozen throughout space, only to be released from the heat of the atmosphere.

This one asteroid, laden with viruses and bacteria, crashed on Earth, and all biological data was released, mixing with the gases and chemicals secreting from this hellish world.

This was how life started on this world. You were all an accident.

Intrigued, we watched. The Sentinels were created to watch the progress. At first, we were only psychic beings, no flesh, and we watched as simple organisms were born and thrived, the atmosphere shifting, allowing for the life to evolve and adapt. In time, the evolution and

adapting led to the foundation of humanity, and that was where we saw a frightening conclusion.

Humans acted very much like vermin, or viruses. You set up a central colony, only to swiftly expand and multiply. Resources are used until near depletion, leaving waste and corruption, and the central colony spreads out, becoming several colonies, all following the same patterns.

It was assumed, correctly as it turns out, that humans would infest and conquer the world. If this would be done, then they would colonise the universe when they learnt how to leave their own world. Therefore, the Sentinels were granted flesh, moulded so we looked human. However, for our survival, we were stronger, faster, more agile and attuned and our flesh was indestructible. In addition, we did not age.

We were also granted names and places of origin. Jaxxasa from sector 9740. Irinapaj from sector 5481. Gharazom from sector 2291. Helionpok from sector 4449. Finally, myself, Eristok, from sector 5840.

Our objectives were simple. Watch over the humans, remain detached and emotionless. Until we felt they were ready to accept others, prevent them from leaving the planet, and others from entering. Only a few slipped through, and humans have only gone as far as their moon, which was our main gathering place.

Our duties also included observing the control measures the higher beings were creating. Viruses, sent on asteroids, creating all the viral epidemics throughout human history. Control measures in case the final choice had to be made.

Well, just last week, that time came.

We gathered on the moon, to deliver the final evaluation on the humans. All, following Jaxxasa, who ordained himself as leader of us, although we were all meant to be equals, said humans were a selfish race, uncaring towards each other, let alone any other races. Give them the chance, they will wipe everything out.

However, I felt different. Yes, there were those who were selfish and couldn't accept others, but the majority did. It was this majority that I, I must confess, grew fond of. The others only looked for the negatives, I looked for the hope. I must also confess that I grew especially fond of one human in particular, wishing to abandon my post and live with her. Although, I never told the others of this, and Isabella did not know my true

nature. I was hoping to strip away my alien DNA, leaving me completely human.

Seeing that I felt humans deserved another chance, I was given an ultimatum. Find proof, by the end of the week, and the humans will be granted another chance. So I scoured the world, searching and recording it with my memory. However, when I returned to the moon at the end of the week, filled with evidence that could save humanity, I was greeted by the others in protective suits, and Helionpok handed me a vial with what she called the antidote.

Before I could even ask antidote for what, I saw the asteroids hurtling past the moon. I knew exactly what was on those asteroids, and I knew the others had lied. Going by travel time, even with wormholes, it would have taken a week for the asteroids to reach. They lied about my report, saying I had also agreed that the humans deserved death.

Enraged, I rushed to Earth. I knew that the moment those asteroids hit the atmosphere, burning, the viruses would be released and airborne.

Moving swiftly, I found Isabella and took her to a secluded warehouse. Already, seeing how I dematerialised and materialised in different locations, she was terrified. Knowing I had very little time, I told her to take the antidote. Of course, she did nothing, staring at me in fear. Then, I heard the explosion as the asteroids ripped through the atmosphere, flying through the air high above. Having no choice, I was about to forcefully inject her to keep her alive.

But I was followed.

Jaxxasa was there, explaining he assumed I had become attached, and this was enough proof to condone what he was about to do. Before I could react, he injected me and Isabella with a concentrated form of the virus. With it taking affect within seconds, I watched as Jaxxasa took the antidote, and walked off to watch the carnage.

***

And so that is how I got here, slowly dying and rotting from within, driving a car through chaotic streets filled with dying humans. Their stench was so strong it ate through the car, forcing me to vomit.

By my side, Isabella started spasming so hard I could hear every bone in her body break. Her body exploded in pus-filled boils and her bowels,

which themselves had been liquified, tore out from her body, filling her pants. Finally, with one last scream, an explosion of blood erupted from her mouth and she was dead.

My time was soon. My body started to spasm, my strong bones breaking. Knowing I had other choice, my love dead and stinking beside me as her flesh boiled from within, I let the virus take me.

The car crashed into a wall and I saw no more.

***

Bright harsh light woke me up. Opening my eyes, I was blinded by the light shining through the spider web of cracks on the bloodied windshield. The feel of the seat felt like knives on my sensitive skin. Unable to bear it any longer, I climbed out and shielded my eyes.

As I hopped down from the car, I was suddenly made aware of my reduced stature. The feel of the Tarmac ached through my naked feet, and I was startled by the fact I was naked. A shocking white, pale complexion, and the heat of the sun burnt me. Everywhere I looked, I saw bodies littering the empty streets. I also came across the corpses of my fellow Sentinels.

Walking over, I leaned over and peered into each of their eyes, to access their memory. Turned out the antidote was actually a concentrated form of the virus. They too disobeyed their orders, they were no longer impartial. They all grew to hate the humans, the final choice was based on that.

Suddenly, I saw my reflection in their eyes. I was small and gaunt, thin pointed chin, small mouth, yet with enlarged neural cortex and bulbous eyes. Looking at my hands, they were thin and elongated. In my nakedness, I also observed I no longer had sexual organs.

What had I become, why was I allowed to survive to become this way?

Then, my answer was granted. Tearing through my sensitive ears, an explosion roared above me. Looking up, I saw an asteroid, and I knew this was once again laden with viruses and bacteria. They were starting again, and I was I called upon once more to observe this new experiment.

Old Storage Buildings and Beyond

David S. Pointer

The final soldiers expected
a basic biohazard sanctuary,
but the new plague had been
hidden behind Dioxin barrel
incinerators where clown tentacles
previously burned regenerated
complete with fleas capable of
infecting oceanic robotuna and
anything else slithering or just
humping liquid meadow trails.

Akanour's Find Revealed

Gary Murphy

Susan was blond, 23-years-old, slim and healthy, but dim-witted, sadly. The doctor had discovered her attending one of the many séances she conducted in Liverpool where she was the medium who channelled the long-lost. Those poor unhinged souls wandering directionlessly in the spiritual wastes and the as yet before under-explored, forgotten other-worlds. The vessel through which they made themselves heard. Unusual and bizarre events these, and especially so to the under-prepared novice and uninitiated. Yet for a seasoned and hardly-perplexed man of the world and psychic explorer, he was not foreign to this field of sensory power, to listen to and observe the activity of ghosts and phantoms in all their fluctuating forms, and to hear their voices. The Paranormal was his life.

Dr Sylvian Akanour and Susan Clements boarded the liner at Southampton. The doctor was set to take New York City (along with its quiet scientific community) by stupendous storm with this young woman's psychic abilities. This young woman happened to be the closest to 'miracles of the mind' he had ever witnessed. The girl was a modern-day original wonder and her skills never ceased to hone-in remarkably well to the tasks he assembled before her. Not always just in a telepathy sense and her prowess at séances around England, but more recently because she had rewarded his efforts with a scoop. She had started shifting inanimate objects, simply by concentration. It was an exciting prospect to believe he might just convert a bushel of astonished and dumbfounded non-believers in New York.

Presently, the RMS Titanic sailed gently by Cape Race, Newfoundland, when the good doctor returned to his cabin with drinks and snacks. He shared these homely quarters with Susan, and the girl requested she remain there for the entire journey. Akanour wouldn't have wished to upset her by starting a dispute over such trivia and agreed. He explained that because he was so overcome by her agreeing to travel overseas at such short notice, he would literally wait on his 'find' hand and foot if it made her feel any better.

Susan had reluctantly agreed. But also confirmed over a romantic meal in London's West End that in her humble opinion the high seas made her extremely nervous.

And she had a bad feeling about sailing all the way to New York.

The wind gusts which battered the Titanic the previous day had miraculously subsided, and now a calm night was had by all. That was all good and well. Nothing could be better. Until the meteor crashed into the sea nearby and not far from the ship's position. A thudding crash on impact that was followed by a huge smouldering hissing sound as flame connected with freezing cold water. A flare of white flashing light emanated, which illuminated the region for miles.

As if thinking the ship was getting bombarded by Johnny Foreigner's missiles and that the world had somehow perhaps descended into a full-scale war, passengers aboard the Titanic started screaming. Some ran amok in a pathetic frenzied panic along the ship's decks on either side.

They shouted and screamed indiscriminately, scurrying about like frightened cattle, the self-made aristocracy and the not-so, on board falling from grace, replete with the indisputable joy of seeing them so humiliatingly flustered, bruised, battered and beaten. Photographs of such an event could have possibly proven to be rare and priceless.

Sensibly, most took little heed of matters in the waters over the side, preferring to dance in the ballroom, eat and get stupidly drunk. After all, wasn't it all about vacation, vacation, vacation? They were there to have a good time, not be bothered by a stray rock falling from space, perhaps packed with Platinum…

A large white fog hovered over the meteor's watery new grave, and it drifted towards the ship.

It soon cleared…

…Yet there remained a cloying scent of something similar to really powerful sulphur.

It would keep in the atmosphere for a long time.

Sharing the same bed, Susan and the doctor napped. They were blissfully unaware of the chaotic furore above on deck but instead chose to lie still, and remain nestled in each other's arms while the noisy, spoilt and buttery passengers running about above that level of cabins, calmed and became more civilized. It would have taken a while, if it happened at all.

It was a ship, for God's sake, and people running amok all over its decks might have been a scandalous travesty. The conning booking agents had advertised a smooth, seamless journey at a reasonable price. All this panic was simply not cricket! It was 1912, after all, and this was the most famous luxury liner on the planet, RMS Titanic! People should have been put in a line and shot…

There was a scuffling sound from the cabin next door which bore no semblance to anything Susan had heard before. It did sound like a scuffle, a grapple, or two bodies fighting, followed perhaps by muffled yelps, and then groaning. Perhaps satisfactory or sensual groaning, but groaning nonetheless. It scared her but also impelled her to want to go and investigate the sordid matter for herself.

'What was that?' she hissed into a silent and oblivious Akanour's ear. 'I tell you, I heard a scream. Somebody might be in danger…'

He muttered, '…This ship will probably one day prove infamous for honeymooners, darling. Go back to sleep, please.' He yawned despondently and rolled over onto his other side, showing Susan his back.

Susan listened.

A conspicuous silence ensued.

'Nothing, see?' the doctor murmured. 'Now, please, go back to sleep.'

She waited until he did what he did every time he fell into a deeper slumber, which was snore. Sylvian Akanour was actually French, short and rotund with a head of thick and greasy black hair. He wore spectacles at 54 years-old, and had an unparalleled flair and charm for a man of his age and stature. Susan had fallen for his fake charm. She had been blinded by the promise of limelight in New York. She would get a shock. It would be sharp, barbed and twisted, straight in the gullet. The Big Apple with its American dream and the beautiful people and bright lights beckoned, and this gifted young lady had since decided with or without the doctor she would make her newfound country work in her favour. She would embrace the USA with open arms! Akanour was a fool in believing this was all about him…

But when Susan Clements snuck out of the cabin and emerged onto the upper deck, she discovered a new voodoo, a new magic. A new supernatural that might have previously been extinct or undiscovered in the world. The people that greeted her upstairs were not the same folks that boarded the ship in Southampton, alongside her. They were totally different.

She wanted to scream but the sound lodged in her throat like a dry lump in her neck that wouldn't budge, as it gripped her jugular and squeezed.

The young woman standing before Susan was of a disposition she had never before witnessed, but knew through her times in touch with the Dead, this girl was indeed dead and lost. She hovered with slumped shoulders, like those of a crippled young adult struggling to remain upright on her feet. Her mouth gaped and hung slackened, set in a pale oval face, a steady green-like fluid issuing forth from between the lips.

But it was the eyes that struck Susan as the girl's most disturbing feature.

The eyes were glazed over with a sickly milky-white coat, and that signified they were the eyes of a dead person.

Recently deceased…

As the Undead advanced slowly in a waltz-like, deathly shuffle to claim Susan as her own, the young psychic retreated, turning and running farther along the deck, away from this loathsome, dead-eyed off-shoot of a live reanimated corpse. This was something which was surely already deceased, but still able to walk about.

She could detect the sulphuric stink now, strong and powerful as it wafted in from the water over the ship's side. Oddly at first she thought it resembled excrement, but wasn't that what sulphur stank of anyway, that and rotten eggs? Whatever its properties, it proved devastating to all who came into contact with it, for Susan soon realized all whose nostrils it pervaded soon turned into a totally different and macabre character altogether. She could not be entirely certain whether or not she was turning into one of these things herself. But judging by the sights around her, it would hardly be surprising if she did, for why would she be any different to the others that had succumbed to this bizarre virus-like affliction?

A young boy nearby sitting on his toy-trike, looking up through white milky glazed-eyes, seemed to yawn. Goo spilled from his mouth. Unlike the others infected he didn't move towards her, like a moth to light like the others, but rather instead chose to just sit there quietly, staring up at her, like looking into space.

The whole cruiser had transformed into a monument of fear and a loathsome haunt for these strange people walking around aimlessly. But also, now she had fathomed, these people did not seem to want to cause

harm. They were like zombies, in a time when the phrase probably hadn't even been coined, but just appeared lost, without purpose or direction.

Innocent and unhindered but for their inability to speak, they maybe harboured a longing to communicate, but found it a task too difficult to execute coherently. Perhaps it was impossible.

They seemed void of inhibition. But looked…

…Perhaps like they needed something.

Susan Clements suddenly knew. Of course, they needed to LIVE, to be ALIVE. It was like these poor souls yearned and longed to be back as normal and it was as if that was close by, if only another magical meteor would strike the water and change everything back to the Land of the Living, give back the lives they had since abused. Given a second chance, another try, they would refrain from all they had partaken in the past and make amends, now they had been given this time to reflect. Their eyes begged to return.

And then Susan felt the sharp pain in her skull, battering it from inside and trying like a metal claw to scratch its way out beyond the place above the ridge of her nose, between where her eyebrows met in the middle. It was like a stabbing thread of glass being inserted, cold and sharp, bringing maximum pain as she raised her hands to examine its source.

Immediately she deduced it was here her special mental ability required application, if she was to survive the onslaught directed from one of these stricken. These monsters were not zombies. They didn't eat or crave human flesh…

Instead, they were ancient monsters of the mind that activated spurious damage from deep within the human psyche, whose influence was purely psychological, and ripped those of us unguarded to shreds.

The 'inflicted' human causing Susan's pain was a woman in a white flowery gown and seemed to contort her rictus mouth into a grotesque grin as she stood in the middle of the deck. She watched Susan intently. The look was that of death itself searching the troubled souls of others while quietly figuring out pathways to destroy those very same poor innocent souls. They would be ruthless in their quest, however alien their origin. Susan thought her eyeballs would surely explode in their fragile watery sockets, as the afflicted one moved closer.

Their concentrations locked in psychic battle.

The fight between the two women was on.

Now, as Susan's eyes milked over it was the strange womanly 'being' that displayed signs of suffering and she raised her hands to grip the sides of her head. Whatever the effect, it pained the creature and the rapidly 'turning' young psychic put all her efforts into causing this creature maximum hurt. It was a battle of mental survival, and one of abject agony.

Susan was winning.

As she herself turned into one of these maniacs, she suddenly pinpointed the putrid and corruptive sulphuric alien scent that played the major part in everyone's fall from grace, and the stink was all-encompassing. It was the kind of drug that corrupted the senses starting with the mind by inducing its mental meltdown, and then working its way around the rest of the body.

She would not let this moronic woman beat her.

The zombie's head began to shimmer uncontrollably, and its hands reached up and loosely gripped either side, until it suddenly began to crack and ooze blood, through these cracks, when the whole skull just came apart.

Fragments of bile-coated bone cascaded onto the wooden deck as its spent body slumped.

Susan could hardly have been able to tell, but despite her powers she too had since become one of this new psychic alien breed. She herself felt the urge to psychically test mortals.

As if to acknowledge this new influential and world-defying urgency to cause maximum damage to everybody in sight, it was here the Titanic collided with the tall iceberg and everything turned black and the power on board the ship suddenly cut out and flung everything into chaotic darkness. There was a massive roar as the engines seized, and a cataclysmic screech as the vessel itself made abrupt contact with the huge wall of ice.

New York could wait. So could the world. The contagion which had infected, with its corruptive effect, the Titanic's passengers and crew, was of monumental proportion, but a disease that would soon dissolve in the depths or be swept away, and remain in the deep waters where the famous RMS Titanic ship was mysteriously swallowed up in its entirety.

Susan Clements' astonishing powers would never be made public…

…And the failed and forgotten Dr Sylvian Akanour and his long sought-after rare find would never be revealed.

Egremont Undead

Gary Murphy

It started when the Sellafield waste-carrier truck rolled through Egremont on its way to the nuclear-processing plant near Seascale and toppled over. Curiously, this happened during the night hours when most of us were sleeping, and yet there was nothing of it on the news bulletins the next day, or mention in the press of the crew on board that mysteriously perished in the crash.

Not that there was much to mention. Not that it was the first time something like this had happened. Probably…

Not like it was the first time that incidents such as this had been hidden. Probably…

It was a huge yellow BNFL (British Nuclear Fuels Limited) tanker and driven by Dean Franks, a native of the nearby town of Whitehaven. He had been taken to the hospital with minor head injuries, but had strangely died from his wounds before waking on the ward.

There would be inquiries about his bizarre demise, which would just be dismissed.

The ‘cleansing teams’ would work fast and hard on Egremont High Street where the tumble occurred, deployed as soon as the call came in at the plant 8 miles away.

Weirdly nobody came forward as witnesses to the scene of impact.

…As was always the case…

One man who slipped under the radar was David ‘Dolly’ Williams, and on the night of the crash, he had been first on the scene, drunken and wonky for it. Dolly lived in the fields, the nooks and crannies, doorways and backyards. He was homeless, a drunken alcoholic, and barely alive at the best of times. He bore a grudge against the town of Egremont, choosing to blame it for everything shitty in his life, as if the town, its bricks and mortar, its streets and avenues, and its people especially, owed him a favour. He swore he wouldn’t just lie down and take its shit, but sadly, that was what he was forced to do on a daily basis, for Egremont owed him nothing and instead detested the lazy work-shy Dolly and his trouble-shooting and his careless and foreign attitude towards his fellow man on the street.

Egremont owed him nothing.

But he owed Egremont…

Often he would sleep in the old disused library building's closed-off back-garden, which also doubled as a cemetery for many of Egremont's past and notorious miscreants. Buried here because the locals did not wish to shame the spirits of the mostly innocent resting in the larger Egremont Cemetery. Murderers, rapists, robbers…they were all buried in the Crippled Hen Library's back garden, their graves unkempt, swamped in grass and shrubs. Forgotten and reviled.

But not forgotten and reviled by Dolly, who knew he would inevitably join them one day. That place always interested him, and far from creeping him out, or having to sleep amongst those burial plots at nights, the history was insubstantial, it didn't freak him out at all. They had become his friends, the dead. He loved spending drunken nights sleeping with the decayed, rotting corpses of villains and ancient vagabonds. After all, they were all part of Egremont's vast cultural history. No town was ever squeaky clean, and this one was no different.

The night the Sellafield tanker tumbled and rolled over onto its side, Dolly almost shit his pants because it wasn't far from the street bench where he sat with his bottle. There was the sound of the rattling engine as it cut out altogether, followed by a loud screech of metal against concrete as it scraped the short distance along the High Street. Nobody was about who could have witnessed it, only him it seemed, and whereas it looked like two of the passengers had flown through the windscreen to their deaths, the driver struggled to free himself in the cab. But, like a ragdoll, Dolly watched as he eventually gave up and went unconscious.

It was here the homeless man spotted something. The tanker was leaking. A golden-yellowy fluid emptied into the roadside gutter, coursing along the road into the drains. Bizarrely it resembled cider.

Dolly swigged the remaining threads of cheap supermarket wine from his bottle and shambled over to the big yellow metallic wreck, grinning insanely.

'This has got to be good stuff,' he commented as he held the empty green bottle under the leak.

He was actually going to drink this.

Looking around once the bottle was full to the brim, he wished the truck's dead passengers farewell and sauntered off in the direction of the

Crippled Hen's back-garden for the night. Perhaps if he'd been less drunk tonight he would not have acted this way but it took a drunken state of mind in the first place to imagine this toxic waste could be consumable, rather than poisonous.

Dolly was a bitter man. As he shuffled off into the back street, he cursed Egremont and its folk and hedged closer to the dismantled wooden-gate leading into the back of the Crippled Hen Library's mini-cemetery.

Now he just needed to find somewhere cosy.

He slumped down in the corner of the yard. He looked out over the graves and again cursed the town he loathed and detested. The town he knew owed him something, but couldn't figure out just exactly what…the town that treated him like shit…all because he liked a little spot of drink now and then.

But his suffering would finally come to an untimely end on this unforgettable night in Egremont. Tonight the legend would be born.

The yellowy liquid burned his mouth and throat. It cooked and melted his stomach as he lurched forwards in agony for his roasting guts, until he finally fell onto the grave.

His death was immediate, but hardly surprising or unexpected. The remaining liquid in the bottle soaked into the earth, seeping through the soil.

Until it eventually soaked the rotten corpse's remains underground.

It instantly breathed new life and whatever the toxic properties and key ingredients the elixir contained, it was enough to bring the corpse back from the dead, renew its veins with fresh blood, and put proper meat on its bones.

It struggled in the ground, but was strong. It reached out and touched the grassy verge of its place of burial. Once the hand emerged so did the rest of it, as the huge muscular but decayed body climbed from its hole in the cemetery grounds. It looked nothing but impressive, a skull barely fleshed out with a body that was big and amazingly agile enough for being dead over a hundred years. This ancient vagabond was alive and active again after a long time wandering in the eternal wilderness.

It looked at the bottle in the grass which seemed to look like it was glowing.

The rich thirst the Undead currently experienced was massive and the nearby bottle looked too tempting to simply ignore. It reached down, raised the half-full bottle of deadly toxic waste to its lips and drank greedily. It

was what it needed, having the effect of water, and as the creature drank it, it filled out further with regards to flesh and bone as everything came together. Sellafield it truly seemed had concocted a mixture that could bring the dead back to life, that could regenerate dead tissue and restore long-deceased thought process in the dead's antique inactive minds.

It was no less than a miracle.

But it was also the first sign of the apocalypse.

This creature knew it needed pure fresh blood to exist and as it stumbled out the Crippled Hen Library's back-garden wooden door it walked out onto the High Street and saw the crash site. The corpse instantly identified its first port of call for a healthy, nutritious meal. There was a young man, maybe 21-years-old, who stood there by the toppled yellow tanker and swayed drunkenly.

Obviously another drunk…

The town was full of them. And they all seemed to emerge at this time.

As helicopters crowded the skies and vehicles of all shapes and sizes arrived at the incident, this zombie-like creature accosted and dragged the young man into the alley and started to work towards a longer existence by eating his flesh. Taking a bite from his neck, the blood festooned and entered its mouth, filling it with great feeling. It grew stronger by every second. With every scarlet drop, this sustained the creature, as it gradually became more human with every bloody strip of flesh it removed from its victim's dying, thrashing body.

By the time it finished, it was fully human. All it required to look the part was decent clothing, shoes that fit, and how many years was it since it had a bath?

'Thank you for giving me life, people of the world,' it said, and looked up at the sky. 'I cannot thank you enough.'

But it was Sellafield it needed to thank, for a discovery that would never be realized.

With a spring in its step, the once-hanged murderer who stalked Cumbrian streets preying on the nightlife's prostitutes many years ago had a new lease of life. It could not remember its past and would have a sense of new-born greatness for some time. But one day it would remember, and emerge again from obscurity to terrorize the streets.

It was the most recent in a long line.

In the Crippled Hen cemetery, the rejuvenating mixture spilled into other graves. It was then that further corpses began to climb from their plots, stand and walk. In this state of grace, these male and female murderers and robbers also had to kill to survive, and that inevitably meant devouring their victims if they were to live ‘as humans’. It was instinct. Knowing what had to be done.

The Egremont Undead now walked, emerging onto the High Street like scruffs and tramps. But decayed, rotten…

A different class of scruff and tramp…

A great many ‘walkers of a zombie kind’ knew if they were to survive they would need to find alternative routes out of the town centre. Some went left, some went right. Either way, their paths would lead to Council estates, and these streets and avenues would be how they imagined, a rich source of food. If they continued further, they would turn off into lanes leading them into other neighbouring towns. Obviously it would have been quicker by transport, longer on foot…either way, achievable. And almost all these creatures would get the shock of their lives to see one of those lumbering, growling metal sheds pass them by during the early hours.

A great deal of the twenty or so walking-corpses would leave the town unabated.

Matilda Sherry, a notorious child-killer and one of the last females to be hung for her fetid crimes before hanging was abolished forever was one of the terrible crew which emerged from the Crippled Hen. Currently she had her mouth under the toxin-leak, swallowing the elixir and cackling like a wretched, evil old hag as she did so. Indeed, in her glory years she had been a wretched, evil old hag, having stolen many of the small community’s youth and disposed of them in most despicable ways. She was a town shame, buried and forgotten.

Most of the zombie ones hereabouts fell under that banner of reviled and forgotten.

But most notorious was multiple-murderer Tilly Weather. She had seen off many in her time in most grotesque fashion and was hung by the neck to die, mere weeks before Matilda Sherry.

Tilly killed indiscriminately, to get doled out such a dire fate, but some might add deservedly so, for before she hanged she cursed the gathered crowd vehemently, as she stood on the gallows with the noose around her neck. She cursed the men that abused her, the women that

guarded these men, and their bastard offspring. She swore she would return in spirit to burn the town to the ground, taking everyone's lives with it. Like the zero-tolerance the townsfolk had shown with her, and having shown no mercy and deduced she was fit for the death penalty as opposed to life imprisonment for her slayings, she too, would show no mercy as she swore to return and watch them all burn…

At least, that was how the story and myth was logged.

People often also said Tilly Weather had never existed.

One of the rapidly 'turning' creatures that had gotten the scent of fresh blood stopped feasting to glimpse the shambling corpse of Tilly Weather passing nearby.

This creature was sure of that vintage face. Unmistakeably Tilly Weather, a face it would always remember, imprinted in its mind so as never to forget, now recaptured like a ghostly spectre and vividly beautiful in her corpse's reanimation. The long-flowing red hair that swept past the corpse's shoulders…

'…Tilly, is it you…Tilly Weather?' it said, dropping the severed half-eaten limb.

Tilly Weather turned and smiled at the blood-smeared zombie, her mouth lipless and displaying a full-set of crooked yet perfectly white teeth.

That was Tilly's unforgettable smile.

The zombie looking directly into her bottomless eyes knew it had her exactly where it wanted her and it walked towards her as if about to embrace a long-lost relative. But upon the point it reached her, outstretched its arms to clasp either side of her skull. It was about to kiss the violent murderess.

Until Tilly realized that wasn't going to happen.

Robber Maxwell Robertson reached out and gripped the skull of the woman who had viciously murdered his wife all those years ago, his beloved Daisy. Had she never died, he would never have robbed the bank, and not have gotten gunned down in the process, during his half-baked escape attempt along Egremont High Street.

Tilly's head separated from her shoulders effortlessly and when the zombie dropped it on the ground, it brought its right heel down onto it, crushing it and grinding it into a fragmented soft powder. A breeze lifted, blowing the dust into the atmosphere where the odd behaviour had started,

as the Police, Ambulances and Sellafield vans began to congregate at the scene of the huge yellow overturned tanker.

The army was there also, gunning down the miscreants and bundling onlookers into vans and cars. These people were never to be seen in public again. Too much knowledge and important information was potentially dangerous. Measures had to be taken. After all, it wasn't just Sellafield and its sorry arse on the line. It was the country itself, the officials, the Government…

The world was watching and the world was unforgiving.

The Crippled Hen Library still sits at the centre of Egremont town, but the cemetery is empty. Those that were fetched back to life are still around. And slowly but almost certainly multiplying across not only this country, but as far as Europe, America and the rest of the world. The Apocalypse was underway.

And it all started with a poor drunken tramp called Dolly.

The City Gate

J.R. Roper

John Rolle stepped onto the dark street. Sludgy mud and excrement squished beneath his feet. To his left, the northern quarter was a well lit village all to itself. Snooty bastards wouldn't escape death, but they could pretend for now. South, toward the main gate, fires burned as they had for weeks, cleansing the city of the belongings of the sick and dead, and occasionally of corpses when the body carts had stopped for the day.

Smoke mixed with the stench of rotting flesh, urine, and shit. John might have heaved if he had anything in his stomach, but the smell was becoming normal to him. As he strode into the darkness, he stepped around the corpse of a decaying cat that no one had dared to pluck from the mud. John nearly picked it up, having nothing more to lose.

He passed the fires and leaned against a boarded up house, just out of view of the city guards who protected the gate from anyone who showed signs of the pestilence. John waited. Cold and wishing he could stand next to the fire—or in the fire.

After an hour, a boy, cursed much like John, approached and halted about ten paces away.

"What's wrong, boy? Afraid I'll infect you?"

"Not you. Tough old bastard." The boy tossed a pouch to John. "He approaches the city with a cart of devilry. Should be here within the hour." He pointed at the pouch. "Master Wallen says there's enough to pay the guards a month's wage."

John weighed the pouch carefully. "Half my wage is missing."

"You'll get the rest when the deed is done."

Damn kid knew his business. John considered him a worthy partner although the boy was not yet a teenager.

"Know where I might find a fresh corpse?"

The boy nodded. "Small cottage on the south side of Waverly was boarded yesterday. The pleas and cries ended this morning. Should be a good one."

Business. That was it. Business. John motioned for the boy to move on and he strode toward the guards. He recognized one whom he'd dealt

with before, Fobs they called him, but the other, a young pup, was new to the job. John made for the veteran guard, but the young man, a handsome brute up close, stepped in front of him.

"Return to your home."

John cracked a smile. "How's your family, boy?"

The guard raised his club hesitantly. "Why the hell do you care?"

John pulled enough coins to equal the guard's wages for a month and held it out to him. "This should get them out of the city and away from the devil's pestilence."

The guard's eyes dropped to John's hand and he gaped at him for a moment.

Without giving the boy a chance to be valiant and reject the bribe, John dropped the coins into his hand. Once a man felt this kind of money, morals were swept away.

"Just take a short break when you see me approach. Fobs'll know what to do once my business is done." John handed Fobs his allotment, wondering why the old guard hadn’t retired from all the coin he'd been bribed with.

Both men nodded and John made for Waverly. The streets seemed coated with the plague, as if the mud had slurped the flesh of the dead and left it moist and rotting so that all might contract the disease.

John found the small cottage his young partner had described. He pulled a small bar of iron from his belt and removed the well-nailed boards from across the doorway. A door hinge squeaked behind him and John found a small girl with red curls staring at him from across the street. He gazed at her for a moment, wondering if she was alone. Then an elderly man, hopefully her grandfather, pulled her back inside and closed the door. Folk were used to mischief at night. Thieves stole from the dead. The Duke's men removed corpses at all hours to purge the county.

The stench was nearly unbearable as he opened the door. In the dark cottage, John could make out a fleshy white body, half naked, toward the center of the floor. An elderly man with a thick beard. His pallid skin covered in blackish welts. The strong rot meant he'd been dead and cooking in this cottage during the sun's peak hours. It wasn’t an ideal corpse, but probably the best John would find at this time of night.

He went to work. From his pouch he removed a jar half filled with orange marmalade and unscrewed the lid. Then he took a sharpened scraper

and chose the largest of the welts to remove the blackened and pussy skin, and with it, the pestilence. He scraped the rot into the jar and repeated the process three more times. Satisfied, he mixed the jar so well one might have been able to eat the marmalade on bread without even noticing.

As he returned to the city gate, cries and moans rose from a cottage. Another life claimed.

The guards saw him coming and made their way to a tower meant for their rest or defense if it was needed. Fobs knew his role, so he had placed a pike and helmet where John would see it. John opened the gate and removed the hellish marmalade from his pouch. With the scraper, he spread the infected jelly over the steel handle and nearby bolts, leaving a thin enough layer that one would not feel too much tackiness and smell the pleasant orange instead of death.

With his helmet on and pike in hand, John waited in the dank night for what seemed like hours. The creaking rumble of a wagon approached. John stood tall, hoping he looked like a proper guard. A man hopped down and stood on the other side of the barred gate.

"I wish to sell the wares of salvation to the survivors in the northern quarter. My name is Peter Wallen."

"Ah, yes. First son of Lord Wallen. I bid you welcome. Please, Sir, at your father's request I must inspect the flesh of your arms before allowing you and your wares to pass through the gate."

Peter Wallen lifted his sleeves and motioned to the gate.

"No, Sir. I must inspect in the light. Please, enter the side gate and hold your arms near a torch."

Peter sighed but hastily opened the gate, wiping his hands on his pants as he rolled his sleeves and held his arms near a torch. "Clean this ghastly gate. Someone has left too much oil or something on the handle."

"I will make sure it is cleaned, Sir." John pulled the pin that held the larger gate together and opened the thick wooden doors. "May I ask what you are selling, Sir?"

Peter walked his horse drawn wagon through the gate and opened a chest. Within were small bits of dried out bread sprinkled with green mold. "Blessed by the archbishop himself and dipped in holy water."

"If ever an item would save the healthy, this is it, Sir." John stifled a laugh.

Peter nodded to him, swung himself onto his wagon, and weaved his team between fires and toward the lively quarter.

Once out of view, John dropped the helmet and pike. He held the torch to the handle and bolts where he'd smeared the jelly, a mixture of burnt flesh and orange coated the air and stayed with him as he made for his empty home.

***

As John entered the Gray Lady, a pub on the outskirts of the city, he spotted Richard Wallen, tucked away at the corner table.

"Mr. Rolle." Richard motioned to the seat across from him and sipped his ale.

John took the seat and gulped in a tall porter that had been waiting for him. A plate of bread and cheese quelled John's hunger as he waited for Richard to pay up.

"The rest of your payment will be delivered at sundown tomorrow. If it worked, you and your family will live handsomely when I become Lord of the estate." Richard sipped his ale. "I expect that to be soon with my father's failing health and the untimely death of my brother in about three days."

John nearly heaved, but fought back the watery acid filling his mouth. "Much appreciated, Lord Wallen."

Richard smirked, patted John on the shoulder and left the pub.

John finished his meal and returned home. His was the only home not boarded on the street. He entered and performed his nightly ritual, kissing Claire's cloth doll, holding James' wooden sword, and breathing in the fine scent of his wife, Anne, from her woven shawl that only left her when she was taken to the fires.

Some believed the damned had died from the pestilence. But John knew better. The lucky were gone and the damned remained.

Graveyard Boy

Rishan Singh

The graveyard smells
like the armpits of an unbathed man,
that covers itself in centurion black grass,
and yearns to be watered
- groomed like the altar
to a wedding cathedral.

A man and daughter
manoeuvres their children across
- beyond the corrugated path -
to forbid the celebration,
of tears, behind the congregation,
of family ties.

The sun scorches everything.

Everything disappears, during daylight,
for at midnight, the sun fogs
the corpsed ground of infant bones,
stenching worthless and random lives
- thinking not so with the heart.

A boy sings a valediction song for his dad.

Sons and daughters watch him,
throw headstone-flowers,
laced by chemicals
ozzing maggots and ringworm vomit,
that throw at our imagination
surpluses of lustitude.

And the lustitude of sex that made him

seemed
to have erected and aroused
some other emotion kind,
when the guts he had,
fed on revengeful-greed-fog.

Hearing the bones, of him,
crick-crack-and-fall,
held us back behind the graveyard fence,
as the crumbling subsidedly pulled -
pulled us into the corpse path
where sons and daughters
manouvered their children
who were invisible to us all.

What They Left Behind

Michael Porter

Earth Union Ship Cathorar 2278 A.D. 7/27 11:11pm Day 1460

One more year. One more year and the ship would reach Proxima Centauri. At least that would break the routine of James Brimley waking up from stasis, checking on the fusion drive, running diagnostics on the ship's systems, and then going back into stasis. Normally various crew members took turns at this duty, but James had volunteered to do all the shifts. It was the only way he could get through a mission. He was not only claustrophobic, but couldn't stand the idea of being asleep for five years straight without little breaks.

Brimley had a pretty good routine going each time. Once he finished checking the ship's systems he'd read Oliver Twist aloud next to Olivia's stasis chamber. He liked to think on some level of consciousness she found it comforting. He'd have a small meal consisting of rice and chicken. Do some jogging while watching Big Trouble in Little China in the crew lounge, read some more, and then suit up to go back into stasis.

Going into stasis wasn't like going to sleep. You went in the tank. The smell of the air changed, dried out, and then oblivion. Seemingly an instant later alarms were going off and the whole crew was waking up. James woke up ok. The others had a rougher time. Olivia was throwing up. Gram couldn't seem to stop coughing. Erwin was busy shouting orders at everyone. Dr. Wade was running around checking everyone's vitals. It was like something out of a bad comedy for a few minutes until things calmed down.

Nascha Wade was idealistic, solitary, and a private person. Her personality seemed to oppose her career as a medic on a cramped ship, but she seemed to enjoy the work. James flinched as she injected something into his neck with a large needle. Olivia Wyatt was almost the polar opposite. The ship's communications officer seemed to have a knack for knowing everything about everyone. Plus she was hot. Like HOT. Sometimes he thought that was the only reason she'd been assigned to the Cathorar mission. She wasn't the model officer by any means.

Gram Phillips was basically the ship's cop. He was assigned here from Earth Union to make sure that no one fucked up too bad. He didn't pull any punches about letting the others know that either. Gram was not in a rush to make friends, and seemed to get off on making enemies. Erwin Castle was a control freak. Back on Earth, he would have used alcohol to give himself permission to lose control. No alcohol on mission though, so mainly he spent a big chunk of his day being pissed off at people.

Castle didn't waste any time. "I want everyone prepped and ready to go in eight minutes. Meet up at the main bridge. Dismissed."

James got another shot, took a few required medications, and then met up with everyone on the bridge. Erwin was pulling solar system scans up on the main display. "We've found something."

Nascha frowned. "Other than a site for the new colony?"

"The computer's been scanning a planet around 0.05 AUs from the main star. It's in the habitable zone, barely. Proxima is even less of a red dwarf than we hypothesized, so conditions will be rough. The computer also found something unexpected. High levels of CO2, industrial pollutants, residual radiation. Ruins, lots of ruins."

The room went silent.

Phillips was the first to speak. "So there was a civilization on this planet?"

"Yes. We estimate that they progressed to the point Earth was at between 1950 and 1980. However there is nothing active down there. This is a dead civilization. Lots of ruins, lots of radiation. Certainly no longer a good prospect for an Earth Union colony."

Nascha threw her hands up in the air. "Alright, forget it. Lets head home and report what we've found. I might get to see my son again before he turns 16."

"No. Union explorer ship protocol is very specific. We have to make a landing at the two largest cities and take a detailed survey. They, whoever they were, could have developed technology we don't have. There could be stores of valuable materials down there we can't detect."

Wyatt of course had the controversial question of the day. "What if we don't? What the fuck is the government going to do, arrest us? We don't even have to report that we found shit."

"At some point, they will know. Believe me. Director Skyla follows up on everything. It would mean you would lose all benefits, pension,

medical. Everything. They could come back later and go after your family. We have to do this."

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Within ten hours they were launching a shuttle to the surface. Full crew, with the exception of Castle who stayed behind to regulate the operation. The shuttle landed on the outskirts of the planet's largest city. "We got a name for this dump yet?" James tended to use humor to offset his extreme anxiety. He didn't like the damn mission. He didn't want to go on the damn mission. So he might as well make fun of the mission.

Olivia shrugged. "No. Why would we do that?"

"You know, for fun. I think we'll call it Pandemonium."

Castle's voice came in over the radio. "Why the fuck would you do that? Would you quit screwing around and get to work please?"

"Alright. Alight! Holy shit. Whatever."

The alien city rose in the distance. The architecture seemed to be themed around large loops stretching skyward, with little gaps in the stone and metal. Something about the design reminded Brimley of ancient Rome, but at the same time it was completely alien in design. In the far distance a large dark spire towered above the rest of the city. "Guess it's showtime ladies and gentlemen. Lets head in and get some readings."

Everything about the city, for the most part, was like driving into New York on Earth. The team had loaded two vehicles off the shuttle, split up, and headed toward the main structures. Olivia of course stuck with James. Like any other dead civilization scenario some plant growth had overrun the lower levels of the city. There were small creatures running around that resembled something between a rat and a cockroach.

Olivia pointed to one of the bigger sequences of buildings. "That kind of looks like a mall. Let's start there?"

James frowned at her. "Sure, we should try to find a hospital or something useful. Let's head to the damn mall."

Brimley parked the vehicle, and they tried to find an access point. Most of the doors were locked and rusted shut. The laser rifle really came in handy cutting through. The first thing that hit James was the smell. It wasn't rotten or anything. It was like everything in the place had rotted, dried out,

and nothing had moved in the place for a long, long time. "I do not like this shit. We need to get the fuck out of here."

Olivia laughed. "Ya, because that's an option. I know it's creeping you out to explore a dead world. But we might as well do it right and enjoy the view."

"It's not creeping me out. It's just...I can tell this place is fucked. Got that way a long time ago. We have no business being in places like this."

They proceeded through the structure. As much was familiar about the inside of the building as was unfamiliar about it. Some rooms held what seemed to be old, half-rotted clothes. Some held familiar and unfamiliar simple children's toys, with decades of dust coating them. Then they got to what appeared to be a food court. Olivia froze. "Oh my dear God..."

There were 700 to 1000 bodies in the space. It was like an archaeological dig in Pompeii. These semi formless shapes which resembled humanoid form were hugging each other, clutching their children. James saw what he perceived to be mothers with babies. Strangely though not all of the forms embracing seemed to be doing so for protection. Some seemed to be attacking each other. Some with knives, and what appeared to be guns. Most with bare hands. Some of the dusty frozen forms seemed to have partially dismembered one another. James started backing toward where they had entered, "We need to get the fuck out of here."

"Of course not. Hand me the tools. I need to try and collect one of these rifles."

James pulled out his pocket knife and started cutting away at a semi petrified arms to get one of the weapons. Behind them, something moved.

Olivia started to freak out. "What the hell was that?"

"Nothing. Probably one of those ratroach things. Help me pull this rifle loose."

Old flesh tore free as they got a hold of the weapon. Upon examination it wasn't much different from an M1 Garand from World War 2. More movement behind them. Olivia pulled out her sidearm. "Ok, that wasn't one of those fucking roach things. Let's get back to the rover."

"Sure. Nice that you agree with me now."

"YEAAAAAA!!!"

The body closest to Olivia ripped free from its dusty tomb and ripped her throat out. It was like watching a very large cobra strike. As soon as the first drop of blood hit the floor, they all started moving. Like some kind of

macabre ritual, they broke free from their eternal slumber and stumbled toward the warm flesh. James fired up the laser rifle as they started tearing Olivia apart.

He cut down maybe two hundred of them. It didn't matter. They kept coming. By the time Brimley decided to run toward the entry point, most of Olivia's body was gone. His radio fired up. "James. Reading massive movement in your area. What they hell did you do?"

"Olivia's gone man. Book out!! We need to get the fuck out of here man!"

More radio traffic cut in from Wade and Phillips in little scrambled bits. "They're coming...ever...oh God...wha...AAAAAA...hel....Mom...," James was almost to the exit. Through the illuminated entrance he could see twenty or thirty of those things swarming over the rover. It was supposed to be a one day trip. Limited supplies, and those were on the damn rover.

"Erwin, I'm cut off. I can't make it back to the drop zone. You'll have to drop down closer to my position."

"I'm afraid not James. Sorry."

"Castle, what the fuck! I need some help here. You have to pick me up."

"No I don't. You're dead. All of you died down there my friend. Tell you what, my ass is headed back to Terra Nova. A rescue team will be here for you in...oh I don't know...ten, fifteen years. Good luck to you. I tip my hat."

"NOOOO! GET MEEE!! NOOOOOOOO!!!"

The radio cut out. Fifty or sixty more dust things converged on him at the door. "I'm not going down like this." Brimley fired up the laser rifle and fired off some plasma grenades. Cut down three or four hundred more of the dead things, collapsed part of the mall. The sound just attracted more and more. James considered turning the rifle on himself, when someone grabbed him and pulled in into what looked like an air duct.

The child was maybe eleven. She was humanoid, not a lot of features. Big head, large black eyes. Her clothes looked to be fashioned from animal skins. She continued dragging him and they crawled through the air duct. "ς◊㎡∑ ᾠi₹ǂ ㎡∑ iŧ ϒ◊Ш ᾠΔи₹ ₹◊ ѵi√∑." James didn't really know how to reply, he just kept going.

She led him out of another exit in the vents. In what seemed to be some sort of storage area there were five or six of the aliens. Alive, but

poorly clothed and starving. James really didn't know what to say. "Um...hi. Thanks for saving me."

"You're welcome fucktard." The elder alien seemed to speak English. "So, how do you like our scenic little world?"

"Oh it's great you bastard. How the hell do you speak English?"

"I watch a lot of television. We've received a lot of transmissions from your world, and were very careful not to send out any of our own."

The Elder looked very similar to the girl. He (?) was bigger, and had a little white beard. It was the first hair James had seen on any of them. "What happened? What are those things?"

The Elder laughed, almost manically, then a somber expression settled over his face. "Very much like your world, we had a war. A particularly bad one. Almost every nation was involved. People who had lived in peace for thousands of years were soon burning each other's homes and killing children. Out of that madness came the peace, and homelessness, disease, a crime rate out of control. We expended most of our natural resources in that war. When the plague came, we failed to counter it."

"The plague?"

"It attacks the brain. The host's body chemistry goes crazy, burns itself out. The person goes insane and eventually dies. But they keep moving and killing anyway. Within one of your months, most of my world was dead. I am one of the only ones left who actually witnessed the plague."

"So you live here?"

"Here and about twenty other places. We're running out of basic supplies. There are not any to even go find, and for all I know we are the only ones left alive."

A plan occurred to James. "Can you show me a safe way to get out of the city? I can get you out of here if you're willing to go."

"Define safe. Most of the infected had gone dormant, now the whole city's moving. I can show you a way out. It might be safe, or we may all end up dead. I know my people will not survive here for long, so I have no choice."

The aliens led him further into the air ducts. Turned out the ducts fed into tunnels under the city. They wandered through the endless darkness of that forgotten place, with the sounds of the damned echoing after them.

The Elder paused. "They've found their way into the tunnels. I will delay them."

James fired up the power cell on the rifle. "I'm not leaving you here."

"There is no other way. Get my granddaughter somewhere she can live. Save the last of my people. I have lived too long, boy. Get going."

James led the others further into the caves. The Elder never screamed. The sounds of the dead simply diminished. As they moved deeper into the tunnels he noticed strange markings, the ruins of buildings that seemed far far older than the Elder's civilization. "What is this place?"

The girl looked at him for a moment, and then kept moving. "ϣ∑ ∂◊ и◊ǂ ㄣ尸∑Δк ◊ŧ ǂ艹i ㄣ 尸ν∆ς∑. ǂ艹∑ ∂ΔЯк ◊и∑ ◊иς∑ ∂ϣ∑ννν∑∂ 艹∑Я∑."

Finally they emerged from the darkness into the light of day. From what looked familiar, they weren't that far from where the shuttle had landed. It had enough resources to get them back to Earth, it would just take longer. James heart sank as they approached the landing site. Thousands of those things were swarming the shuttle.

"Girl, can you understand me at all?"

She gave him a thumbs up.

"That's good enough for me. I need you to lead the others into the shuttle. Hit the big blue button to seal the doors. Get everyone in the tanks and hit the big button in your tank. You'll end up at a safe place. Can you do that for me?"

She gave him another thumbs up.

They moved toward the shuttle. While the aliens ran for it, James moved off to the right, making as much sound as possible. It worked. Most of the long rotted, dusty, dead creatures moved away from the shuttle and charged him. He set the laser rifle for overload, and prayed the others would make it. In his last moments, what was left of Olivia embraced him and took his life.

The explosion partially shifted the position of the shuttle, and vaporized everything organic in the area. The shuttle took off, starting its two hundred year journey toward Earth, and perhaps insuring a new beginning for a lost people.

Ser Carta Fora Do Baralho…

Sergio 'ente per ente' PALUMBO
Edited by
Michele DUTCHER

"God is deaf now-a-days
and does not hear us,
And prayers have no power the Plague to stay."

Piers Plowman - *William Langland*

The long ox cart was proceeding along the muddy path just outside the town of Lisbon with its heavy load of bodies. While the worn wooden wheels went on and on, many jolts made arms and legs visibly bump several times, but it didn't seem to matter to the three armored men who were escorting the vehicle at dusk past a few lonely trees that grew around the hilly terrain. The mail coif over the old-fashioned helmets the guards wore, along with the thigh-protecting tassets of the brigandine and a red surcoat, were distinctively from the semi-skilled militias of Portugal. These uniforms represented an extensive but clearly light form of armor that would remain in use for centuries in this area of the westernmost part of Europe.

Exactly in the middle of that heap of bodies on the small cart, that was clearly overloaded, a little boy of about 7 years lay, next to some tall men who seemed to be lifeless. Antonio was his name, his long dark hair falling in loose curls around his small shoulders, and he had been taken away from his poor hut because of an order of the guards just before dinner time - along with all of his family: both his parents and two younger brothers. His recollections of what had happened were foggy in his mind, as he was already ill when they had arrived at the place where he lived. But he knew that his father and his mother had been seriously sick for several days before those men came, the same as his unfortunate siblings. Then that long trip had begun, and it hadn't ended yet. There were only two things Antonio was sure about: he was currently surrounded by many cadavers; and the sun was going down, so night was quickly approaching. The little boy couldn't

make out where they were, but it was probably somewhere just outside of town. He had never been there before nor had his parents ever told him anything about it, so it could have also been anywhere else.

Despite all the dead men that encircled his arms, he wasn't dead, *at least not yet*, but he was unable to move his hands or his head. This was because the fever he had was too high and never left him, not even for a single moment. His two vivid chestnut eyes, which stood out from his emaciated features, were unable to see his parents now, and his younger brothers seemed to have disappeared as well. He had lost sight of them as soon as he had been brought by force to the ox cart and they had started moving along the road.

Even though Antonio didn't know where they were heading, he remembered that he had heard something from his father about such things happening in many houses in Lisbon at that time. The word was that 200 people were buried everyday because of the plague that was spreading around the countryside, but he hadn't understood what all that really meant.

Even though the boy couldn't know it, of course, by 1349 in Portugal that terrible epidemic had begun invading inland from the port cities, probably at a somewhat slower pace than was going on in Italy and France. As people began to fall sick and die, it soon became clear that this disaster was not only shaking the Old World to its economic and social foundations, but the current outbreak was also changing the course of human history! In all the countries through which it passed its implications were very deep and very problematic: as the true mortality rate was far higher than it had been previously thought, the epidemic was quickly becoming a real turning point of great significance, and in the end, more than half of the European population would die before it ended.

Prior to that disaster, the Middle Ages had been a time of growth and prosperity as new agricultural techniques had caused a huge rise in population. This growth had in turn led to rising demands for food and had forced people to clear more new lands for cultivation which in turn triggered more population growth, and so on. It was rumored that all this turmoil had begun in Europe only a few years before, in 1347, at the time when some Genoese trading vessels pulled into a port of southern Italy with half their crew already dead or dying from plague. Such ships were a sort of death trap, and the horrific, terrifying illness had arrived! The afflicted sailors displayed black tumors about the size of an apple in their armpits

and their groins, they also suffered severe pain and many died just within a week. As soon as the people of that town had realized that the new disease was coming from those sailing vessels, they expelled them all from the port, but it was already too late: the plague pervaded the city, and then went into the nearby countryside. From Italy the disease spread very quickly northwest across Europe, striking France, Spain and Portugal while some small cities became ghost towns in a matter of months.

There were other rumors that blamed the plague on an earthquake, which had carved a path of destruction from Naples to the north of Italy in the summer of 1347. The earthquake was supposed to have released unusual gases into the air poisoning everyone around the fissures, but people didn't care much about the true reason for the epidemic, as there was nothing capable of stopping it effectively, and so confusion reigned everywhere.

At its height, the plague was merely called the Pestilence or the Great Mortality. Many towns and monasteries, with their crowded unsanitary conditions, suffered worse than the countryside, having very high death rates. Church bells rang constantly to announce the almost continuous passing of citizens until city councils voted to silence their demoralizing clangor. People living during this time, having no idea about the existence of microbes, were completely ignorant of the plague's cause. Some, seeing a correlation between insects and the plague, killed dogs and cats - giving the rats more freedom to spread the disease.

Most explanations of the epidemic pointed the finger to retribution from God, so it gave rise to people who would march from town to town whipping themselves to atone for society's sins. However, in the end, as they spread penitence they also spread the plague… Even though the authorities outlawed them, they continued their journeys. The most effective way of escaping the illness was to stay away from people who might have it, and those rich enough to flee the towns during the plague's height in the summer months did exactly that. In fact, a great fear seized people as husbands abandoned wives, parents abandoned their children, and even priests and doctors refused to see their patients. The plague was not the kind of disaster to inspire man to greater heights of altruism; rather it increased their desire to escape one another.

In truth, before the disaster, things had been going much better than before in the country since 1340: Portugal (also known as *Portucale*) had finally defeated the Moorish army - thanks to an alliance with Castille. The

kingdom had even developed an internal structure which, though built upon medieval feudal principles, proved remarkably effective; its land-based boundaries were notably stable while serfdom greatly declined. But the epidemic had changed all that very quickly, *and forever*. A serious social unrest began and the economy and trade of the whole country started to suffer greatly in an unprecedented way as the dead reached the unthinkable number of 20,000 in the space of a few months.

When the plague eventually seized Lisbon, which had become the capital in 1255, the death list mounted so fast in some areas of the town that the victims died unattended and the living could barely keep up with the sad task of burying the corpses. Everywhere the priests were forced to resort to extraordinary ends to assure at least the semblance of the sacraments for the dying - no small matter in a population as tied to religion as Portugal's at that time. There were also unbelievable tales about some persons engaged in a normal conversation who dropped dead in midsentence, however strange that might seem. Orders were sent out immediately to the city guards that all the streets had to be completely cleaned of dead bodies, but they soon became too many to be dealt with appropriately as the illness was already very, very horrific. No one could be found to bury the dead for money or friendship, so the military had to be necessarily deployed throughout the kingdom. However, this increased the danger of spreading the plague, as the soldiers themselves were soon struck down by the hundreds within a few weeks. Government officials found no special immunity and their loss contributed to the general disaster. Some infected citizens were even locked inside their homes until they either got the disease or died because of starvation in the end.

Despite the sunny, clear days and the calm, blue sea during those weeks, all the main entrances and the gardens of the greatest houses looked silent and saddened, too. The markets that were previously dedicated to farm products and handicraft activities like spinning and wicker-work, now appeared to be empty; the strengthened fortifications with their tall walls, huge bastions and towers in town and at the mouth of the port stood like old, speechless monuments over a barren surface; all of the many taverns situated along the *avenidas*, commonly filled by the crewmembers of the *nefs* in the merchant fleet, seemed extremely strange without any life around, be it made up both of aged trained sailors and young apprentices known as *grumetes* usually arriving from abroad.

The epidemic also created problems for the nobles as the huge population loss in the cities' caused a virtual collapse of the urban grain markets, a major source of income for both noble and church landlords with surplus grain to sell. Citizens dropped dead on the roads, in the fields, and in their houses too. The people who did survive by chance, in growing hopelessness, fell into apathy, leaving ripe wheat unharvested and livestock untended. The sheep, bearers of precious wool, caught the disease too, and died throughout the countryside - the stench of their rotting carcasses filling the air for miles around.

It turned out that this terrible sickness, under different forms, was going to hit Europe many more times, during the next few centuries - causing much destruction along with an obsession with death that worked its way into European culture for generations to come. This was due to the absence of an identifiable earthly cause, giving the plague a supernatural and sinister quality, as if God was punishing the whole of Mankind for its sins. But the people were grateful that God had decided not to kill all of civilization in the end.

But clearly the citizens didn't know that anyone would live and so they were struggling with all of their forces, resources and possibilities in order to survive, fighting to remain alive for one more day. Not all of them made it, unfortunately, and the outbreak reached even the farthest corners of every region, but in the countryside - where people were more spread out – fewer people perished. Because of the large number of deaths, many men and women who died were thrown into public pits or open graves turned into burial grounds until they could hold no more. The oldest, youngest, and the poorest died first, which was predictable. Entire villages and towns in Portugal were going to become unpopulated ruins after all that, or so many thought, anyway.

Before the epidemic struck, Antonio had been aware of the fact that peasant or town families like his were so poor that they sat at the dinner table on a common bench and ate from a common plate. Their poverty had never been a surprise to the little boy, as it had always been like that since he was a small child. But in his mind, as his parents began getting seriously ill, he kept asking himself why all this misery was happening to his unlucky family. They had already been forced to survive on nothing: the deep poverty affecting them all; the small, cold wooden house with a damaged

thatched blackish roof they lived in; the scarcity of food they had always suffered; and the many problems his brothers already had. *Wasn't there any end to their pain and suffering*? It truly seemed to be so, especially as far as Antonio himself was experiencing at present…

Suddenly, the ox cart abruptly stopped. Some words were said, decisive orders were given and the small transport entered through a doorway into an open area, even though the boy was unable to clearly see where it was heading now, as the dusk didn't let him look around. The cart was soon overthrown and the dead bodies, along with living men and women, began falling to the ground at a very fast rate. Something hit Antonio's chest, a pair of hands reached him, then a long arm and many other body parts followed, hurting his head and his back. It took only a few moments before he became completely unconscious, and so the pain ended. At least for the moment.

The guards were getting rid of the many cadavers, and they didn't display any shame about it: they simply did their job and then left that place as soon as possible, as the area itself they were in now made them feel ill at ease, clearly.

It took the boy a few long hours before coming back to his senses again. The deep weakness that affected him, the illness he had already caught and the overall tiredness had gotten the better of him. Now his body was aching, and he discovered - under his poor cream robe full of holes and blood that hardly concealed his skinny build - other wounds he didn't remember having before, both on his arms and chest. Anyway, it was when he stared looking at his surroundings that he understood what had been done to him in reality. All the armored guards had gone, and they had left him in there, among a multitude of corpses and a few dying ones.

But he was unable to move nor could he rise to his feet, because of the fever and his weakness, so he soon fell into unconsciousness, one more time. And the time went by, among his nightmares and the deep sensations of fear and loneliness that enveloped his perturbed mind.

So his true tragedy began…

*****

When the little boy thought he was about to die, and the second dark night had fallen over his bad dreams and his unbearable suffering, inexplicably he

woke up the next morning and found that he was still in this world. His features displayed acral necrosis of the nose, the lips, and the fingers and some strange, residual ecchymoses over both forearms. He didn't know that those were signs that most patients recovering from plague had, but he was just very glad he was alive! Of course, as he began to mull over his frightful situation, it made him truly see before his own eyes how terrible things really were for him now.

There was a multitude of half-naked cadavers, hills of corpses all around him, and a sort of mist that enveloped the whole area as if it was a summer haze caused by the warm climate, that the sun was unable to pierce through at present, but it wasn't really that way, unfortunately… The boy tried to get to his aching feet with difficulty, but this time he made it, and he started walking, while looking around in order to explore the place. But what he saw frightened him more and more and he had to force himself to go on along that muddy path full of rotting corpses that were everywhere. *How many dead men were in that open grave?* Well, they were not only men, but also women, girls, young and older ones, and some small boys like him. Antonio didn't know how he had survived, but he was still breathing, still moving, so maybe God had saved him in a way, and he was really happy because of that!

After a while many worries soon started filling his young mind and he felt lost in a matter of a few minutes. As Antonio began crying due to the deep feelings of despair he had, and the sense of uneasiness he was presently engulfed with, his terrible reality displayed all of its implications. He was unable to find anyone from his family in the vicinity, there was no sign of any living sibling around, and no way to know where they had been left or if they were still in this world anyway. He thought he'd better start his search from the exact point where he had awoken, as the ox cart they were all on together had probably been unloaded in the same place. But he couldn't find anyone he was searching for, notwithstanding the many hours he spent, as he really wanted to discover where they had gone, or what had happened to them. Hoping in his heart that they hadn't already been buried somewhere… '*What if I am the only one of my family who survived?'* he asked himself, without any answer to that terrible question.

Actually, death wasn't a rare occurrence during that time and the little boy himself, even though still very young, had experienced the passing of two younger brothers during the previous years. These brothers simply

hadn't been strong enough to survive infancy, as he and his two remaining siblings had done. But one thing was seeing two brothers die at a very young age, and another was facing the disappearance of his whole family all at once, indeed.

Even though Antonio didn't give up hope or stop his continuous search, he had to move around for a very long time without any result, in the end. Then the boy reached the opposite heap of cadavers and climbed a small hillside nearby: from atop a round outcrop of rock that projected-out the whole site could easily be seen. Two birds of prey each far apart moved their wings intermittently, and a monstrous odor, very slight at first, was becoming stronger because of the winds continuously blowing around. ***The sight was really frightening***; *it just left a person speechless!* And it was at that time that Antonio noticed another thing he hadn't yet completely well considered. So his thoughts finally became very sad and a sort of deep depression overtook him eventually.

He was the only one breathing within that wide burial ground! No one had responded to his cries, no voice had replied to his many calls for assistance and help during the day. He was all alone, apparently, in there. *The only one still living*, anyway.

Then he remembered that old saying his father used to tell him: '**Ser carta fora do baralho'**, which meant *'To be a card out of the set'*. This was exactly the way he felt about himself now, in that place full of dead.

*****

Two days had already passed. That morning Antonio was walking around the smelly terrain, as usual, fighting to bear the terrible stench that wrapped the whole area while searching to get something to eat: some herbs perhaps that he could ingest to ease his continuous hunger that was forcibly spinning him in order to survive. The boy really needed to finally be able to leave behind the need for warm, cooked food which had tormented him for so long the previous day. That need still gnawed at him. After a restless sleep that wouldn't let go of him, he had the upper hand on his worried mind more because of his exhaustion and complete dejection than a real sense of peaceful, deserved rest.

He was afraid he would finally be overcome with hunger and thirst, and his mind was doomed to be lost once and for all, as the overwhelming

fatigue assaulted his senses more and more. When he did fall into unconsciousness, he wasn't able to go searching for herbs or the likes, of course. It seemed that he would eventually give in to desperation as his strength was disappearing little by little along with his will to walk, move around and look for a way out of that terrible place.

He desired food, at least just a simple meal or some vegetables, and he was suffering from that severe absence. This was not just a case of malnutrition, a condition Antonio was already well used to, as a poor boy living in a poor family during the Middle Ages. The physical sensation of hunger was connected to the many contractions of the stomach muscles he presently felt and those spasms were very painful. Besides, he also suffered the secondary effects resulting from the lack of food intake: these included weakness, irritability and decreased concentration, along with reduced ability for the body to self heal from the many scratches and bloody wounds he received while walking barefoot and digging in the dirty ground that covered the whole area, that was the portions not yet hidden by the cadavers.

Beyond that, he was already debilitated and bruised because of the terrible illness he had just gone through - the one which had killed all of his family, probably – that he had come out of just by chance, or better thanks to a sort of miracle. It was really a terrible state of *complete exhaustion* that he had never experienced before! Just a simple meal would be enough to restore his senses and make him feel much better, and the little boy found himself lying down at times while deeply dreaming of him eating something delicious during the many hours he stayed alone on that cold terrain. But he was still unable to eat sufficient food to meet his nutritional needs, unfortunately, and things would remain that way until he was in the burial ground. *He had to get out of there, by any means and as soon as possible!* But what could he really do?

The doorway! He remembered it, the night he had been thrown from the ox cart in here. He had to get back to it, and it had to be soon…

*****

The first tall man at arms that approached to the boundary of the area where the open grave stretched from was a *besteiro*, as he was endowed with a crossbow. Such trained soldiers were mostly drawn from artisans and

tradesmen at that time, while their weaponry was directly supplied by the royal administration. His eyes stared for some moments at the mist that wrapped most of the area in it, then he noticed movement and immediately cried out, “Who is there? Who are you?”

Seconds went by very slowly, then the long-haired head of a short figure appeared and the crossbowman immediately ordered, “Stop at once!”

The fellow guard reached the *besteiro*’s position and asked him, “What’s going on, Cavaco?“

“There’s somebody still alive among the dead, Guterres…”

“*What are you saying*?” the other replied, shocked at his words. “No one can be alive in there!”

“Look for yourself!” Cavaco exclaimed.

“Let me see now,” the soldier said and got a little closer to the boundary. Then he noticed the figure and stared at it very attentively before bursting out speaking. “It’s a boy!”

“What?” the crossbowman asked the other. Then he came nearer and saw him, too. “You! Move away at once, keep away from the boundary…”

Guterres turned his head to Cavaco and protested. “What are you doing?”

“We are here to guard this burial ground. No one is supposed to get out of there, ever!”

“But he’s only a boy!”

“*An ill boy*…” the other man at arms stated. And his crossbow was raised at the figure.

“I’m alive, I’m not ill!” the short figure cried out, still moving very slowly to the limit guarded by the two soldiers. It was Antonio speaking, using the last of his strength.

“Back off! Now!” the *besteiro* stated.

“Please, help me…please” Antonio said.

“Back off! Do as I order,” the man at arms repeated.

“I’m hungry, please…please!” the faint boyish voice implored again.

At that point, the crossbowman fired against the advancing individual and his shot missed the target just by some inches. “That’s a warning, go back to the place you come from.”

“If it’s a boy, how can he be still alive after having entered the open grave full of ill corpses?” Guterres asked the *besteiro* just ten feet away.

“I don’t think it’s alive, actually…I suppose it’s just…” the voice of the other seemed to be trembling a bit now.

“Do you really mean…?”

“Yes, I think it’s a demon…or the soul of a dead man.”

“My God! Oh my…” were the only words Guterres was able to emit. His pale features were really scared and he looked fearful now.

“Did you ever hear of anyone being alive after entering this area?”

“No, never…”

“Exactly! Only the dead lay in there, no one could survive next to all those diseased corpses…” Cavaco retorted.

“I see…you’re right, for sure! Fire again against him…let’s keep him away from here!”

And that said, the *besteiro* fired another time towards the mist. But no cry came out of there nor did the figure seem to be still around.

“Did you hit him?”

The other replied, ”No, he moved away…or I did hit him but my shot didn’t pierce his body with no effect… I don’t know!”

“Oh my God!” the exclamation came out of the fellow’s mouth as a feeble imprecation in a way. “What can we do now?”

“Just move along the boundary and pay attention…if he’s gone, we’re safe, *but if he hasn’t*, well, we’d better be patrolling around very cautiously this evening…”

“Well said! You’re right…” Guterres nodded.

But the boy didn’t show himself anymore before the night fell on the whole area, as the crossbowman had hit Antonio’s back when he had fired the second time, so his tired and wounded body lay on the ground, just past a few muddy rocks, apparently lifeless.

But he wasn’t dead. Not yet.

Inside his dejected mind, the almost unconscious Antonio had many thoughts and questions that roamed unceasingly and didn’t find any answer at present.

Why had he been saved, for what purpose he had survived - by means of a miracle - *the terrible plague that had killed all of his family, if he was destined to die in there anyway*? He was very hungry now, more eager to taste some food than he had ever been before - not even when he was at home, living in poverty with his parents and his siblings. Now, it was as if he had been walled in, there seemed to be no means of escape out of that

burial ground, and if things continued that way he would soon die of hunger.

*****

Four long, incredible days had already gone by, but nothing had changed. Despite the few herbs he had found by chance and eaten, along with the putrid water he had collected and drunk within the walls, Antonio appeared to be a down-at-heels slender little boy, visibly underfed, suffering because of the cold temperatures at night and during the early morning. And he was also half-naked, apart his poor short robe, his body having bite marks all over from the insects in that horrid place.

When he heard the clear growl of his stomach, at times he thought he was so desperate that he might tear apart those bony remains that were all around him and his famished mouth would devour their flesh in the darkness. Antonio was afraid that sooner or later he would end up eating that dirty human meat on those corpses. It seemed that the food was available in great quantity on those dead bodies, if only the terrible stench hadn't proved to be too much to him and hadn't kept him away… He frequently put his cold, wounded hands across his nose and mouth for fear of catching something from the many rotting carcasses around.

The little boy turned his eyes toward the heap of cadavers, but he couldn't get any closer. ***If only he was more insensitive, more streetwise, his senses kept gurgling like a hungry predator, probably he would already done that by now***, *but he simply couldn't make himself do it.* And in a matter of hours it would even be too late to have a try at eating their bodies, for sure. *But what else could he do, after all?* There was no way to force him, by any means, the same as to have a child really like and eat a smelly, unpleasant or disgusting sweet, be sure…

Early in the evening, having come back empty-handed again from looking for anything to eat, as no useful herbs seemed to be growing in this part of the open grave, he whimpered. The boy was well aware of the fact that there was a clear imbalance between energy intake and energy expenditure during his searches as his body was using-up far more energy than it took in. Antonio had also noticed that he was losing substantial fat and muscle-mass day by day, even though he couldn't know that it was the body itself that broke down these tissues for energy. He had continued to

feel very angry, as impulsivity had become one of the most evident and long lasting characteristics of his terrible days, but now his mind was calming down. Because of his starvation the boy found it difficult to even be thirsty, and therefore he was becoming dehydrated.

All movements were very painful and his arms and legs were covered with a dry skin. Swallowing was also unbearably difficult and, in a way, his interaction with the surrounding world was clearly diminishing at a fast rate. It didn't take too long before Antonio quickly fell asleep again, as a consequence of his incredible, growing weakness, and the nightmares that had already started affecting him the past few nights, since he had entered that burial ground, became even stronger now.

A large, dark figure almost ten-feet tall stood behind him, and it seemed now to sit on top of a strange hill made up of many corpses. *"Jesus,"* Antonio started to say, thinking he was really speaking, though he was still engulfed in his painful dream. Then, inexplicably, the head on top of that frightening creature lying on the ground righted itself, opened-up its narrow eyes that appeared like two orange-yellowish slivers and the expression on the silent face melded itself into a sinister sneer. With an open mouth and a terrible look penetrating into the night by force of an unearthly will, one word seemed to be screaming at the boy, resounding across the whole area "*You*!"

Was it already his turn to die now? Was his body going to increase the height of one of those heaps of cadavers whose stench filled the place? Antonio didn't know, but that sight woke him up at once, even though he didn't find just any relief after coming back to consciousness, as the unbearable need for food, some clear water and his deep weakness started again assaulting his senses, soon making him dejected and hopeless again.

The little boy didn't know it yet, but in reality if you don't respond to hunger knocking on your internal door, eventually it will stop knocking. But the repulsion Antonio felt for all those dead men and the terrible stench around kept his undeniable need for food at a distance…

He wasn't dead yet, nor was he saved, so he considered himself to be simply in-between, as that unspeakable place looked like a sort of hellish space that seemed to be unending, even though its sad conclusion was nearing quickly, given his present condition that was worsening by the minute.

*****

Hours went by, days went by too. Antonio didn't know how long it had been, but his body did, as he felt very hungry and his stomach was begging for food. *And water*. The rain he had been collecting while being in here, since the third evening, was putrid now, and some rivulets were already full of blood and skin coming from the many corpses lying on the terrain or heaped one over the other in the burial ground, almost everywhere.

The doorway that was the only way out of that open grave was heavily guarded by the soldiers and it appeared to be really impassable. Not that Antonio hadn't tried again and again, but the last time a crossbowman aiming at him almost hit his head, exclaiming "*Damn demon, go back to the realms of the dead you are from*!" So he had stopped repeating that unwise though desperate move. *But what else was there to do now, what other hope did he have*? The little boy had been kept asking himself this for a long time, with no hope of being saved from the outside.

He kept reminding himself of one image: his father sitting on an old chair in the open space of the only room in their poor small house, slowly stroking his beard and having a sip of wine to calm him down. Antonio had never liked wine, at least the few times he had drunk a very little amount of it he found on the table he hadn't savored it. But the boy had thought that maybe the taste of wine was something adults grew to appreciate and he was still very young those days. Anyway, he would really love to taste just a small portion of that liquid now, instead of the putrid water full of dirty muddy rocks he had been forced to drink day by day while in there. Antonio stared in disbelief at the dark muck he collected in both his hands, then he swallowed and drunk it, even though unwillingly, but out of necessity. Anyway, nothing like that could ever calm his thirst down, as it just made things worse…

*****

The noise of his teeth devouring hard meat with difficulty made him understand he was already awake and he was eating something, at present. Hidden in the darkness of the night, something had finally moved him to reach one of those heaps of cadavers and start eating that rotting skin and bony remains. *How had it happened*? *What was he doing*? For sure, his

state of unconsciousness had made him act that way, otherwise he would never do anything like that, not under different conditions.

But that was the reality: in the end he had simply given up! Dejectedly, there was no way to resist hunger. So the little boy had come close to one of the corpses that were in the best shape, as though he had the wild eyes of one of the night predators… Then he had taken off the dirty skin, making his way through the thousands of insects in the air, breaking the bony arms and extracting the marrow. And he broke it up small, eating it.

But the rotting, terribly smelly meat taken out from those human remains made his desperate situation even more desperate, as he soon became deeply sick because of some other unknown illness, as a matter of fact. And the boy knew he probably wouldn't be so lucky as to make it every single time he got a fever, as when he had caught the terrible plague that was devastating the town those months.

Had he just survived the epidemic that was killing most of the population of Lisbon only to die of something new? How ironic all that would have to appear before somebody's else eyes, but not before his own, of course. *Was there any justice in it*? *Wasn't there any piety or benevolence towards him, after all*?

Then a deep unconsciousness seized him again, and night fell over the entire burial area. ***Or was it just his mind that didn't recognize the difference between day and darkness anymore***? He simply didn't know, nor did it really matter to him…

*****

The mist that usually enveloped the whole area appeared again, and now he spotted some movement inside the fog. It was one, two figures, and others followed them: seemingly a group of many individuals that were marching through it, going that way, slowly, but continuously.

As they got to a tall heap of carcasses, the first one stopped at once and the others did the same. There was a short silence, then something happened.

"About time!" the individual exclaimed unexpectedly.

“Yes, well said…” another bald figure added. He was shorter than his tall fellow but looked also skinnier and very calm, by all means.

“Who are you?” Antonio asked in return. It was as if the boy had just awoken, but his head was still confused, apparently incapable of figuring out what was really going on around him.

“Can’t you figure it out for yourself?” the first one said. “We’re souls, just like you…”

“*Souls*?” Antonio looked surprised.

“You are one of us now,” the second figure nodded. The boy stared at his features for a while, in silence: graying and tall, with two clear eyes of no color in particular on an empty face that caused a sensation of calmness inside him! Even though those traits were faint and feeble, he was sure he had seen his face before. Then he remembered…It was one of the dead men he had noticed on top of the heap of cadavers in the wide burial ground, some time ago. *How was it possible*? Was there really an afterlife after the passing of a man? *Was that really what all of them could expect when death came*? He had many doubts in his deeply confused mind.

“You’ll finally stop living in the streets of Lisbon…”

“But you were strong: you fought for many days before giving up, and we looked at you for a very long time from the other side. You were unable to spot us but we were here, nearby. Some of us thought that you were going to make it back to the land of the living in the end, that you would never die here…”

“So…is this what happened to me? Did I die? Really?”

“Yes, it is so.” the first figure stared at him.

“But I did everything I could to survive, to get out of this damn’ place.”

“Actually, you’ve been saved from a worthless, very difficult life… and your real days have just begun.”

“And what do we do now?” Antonio asked them.

“I’ll bring you to the others, boy,” the other replied. “Your real existence begins now.”

Antonio looked at him in silence and the tall figure placed a hand around his semi-transparent shoulders, then they all headed for the persistent, almost ghastly mist that seemed to be always covering part of that area where the open grave stretched.

Never to be seen again, in the world of the humans anyway.

Creepy Paperback

John Patrick Nelson

Virgil tore open the thick brown envelope, dropping the paperback as it slipped out.

"Shit!" he said, sticking out his foot to try and keep the book from getting damaged as it fell, but only succeeding in kicking it across the room. Puffs of grey stuffing coughed out from between the layers of the packing envelope, and he had to brush it off his hands before he picked up the book. Goddamn thing had cost enough, and he'd hate to dirty up his prize.

He lumbered over and carefully scooped it up, holding it delicately with his fingertips, admiring the cover. He'd seen a photo of it online, but it was even better in person. They didn't do 'em like this anymore, this was the kinda crap that could've only been churned out during the 80s horror glut. "Blood Machine," the title screamed in jagged, embossed red letters, a flaming skeleton against a black background. He had no idea if the art was commissioned specifically for the book, but he doubted it. More likely it was from the files, the kind they'd just slap on and shoot out the door, because they had a hundred other splatter books to put out that month. He doubted a flaming skeleton played anywhere into the book's central narrative.

The author's name was on the bottom of the cover in small silver letters, practically an afterthought. "Ken Morton." The 80's horror answer to Jim Thompson, he'd shit out a book every six months, rain or shine, rife with misspellings, run-ons, goofy plots, weird-ass characters, and the bloodiest murders you'd ever heard of. Most deaths in a Morton book were described as "wet," and went downhill from there. Legend had it he'd get drunk or coked or whatever, write for seventy-two hours straight, wake up a week later with a hangover that would send the devil to church, and a fresh manuscript waiting on his desk. He'd shrug, stick it in an envelope and send it to his publisher, who'd apparently just turn around and print that thing, misspellings and all. Yeah, ol' Ken Morton was a regular rogue, didn't give two shits what the critics thought, and if you didn't like his work, you could go right on ahead and fuck yourself with yer fist.

So it'd been something of a shocker in the literary world to find out Ken Morton was really Terry Lawrence, award-winning author, who only put out books every ten years or so, the kind of dreamy prose poems critics loved, and nobody bought. It'd only come out after Terry Lawrence had apparently decided being a critically-acclaimed author wasn't enough reason to go on living and shot himself in the brains. Maybe it was the shame of his semi-successful secret alias, or the failure of his quote-unquote "real" writing that drove him to suicide, but by all accounts, he was not a very happy dude outside of the work: two divorces, kids who hated him (reputedly for pretty good reason), a very real alcohol problem, and a long line of creditors who were extremely pissed when he tapped out without paying his tabs. Ken Morton enjoyed something of a renaissance for a brief moment, as critics studied his work with a new eye, trying to add metaphor and nuance, discovering it didn't really work, then both Ken Morton and Terry Lawrence more or less faded from the public eye for good.

Virgil had read everything by Terry Lawrence, and *almost* everything by Ken Morton, "Blood Machine" being the Holy Grail that had, until now, eluded him. He thought Lawrence had a gift with words, a piercing eye for character, and was as boring as watching shit dry. Ken Morton, on the other hand, wrote directly and starkly, like with every page he was trying to kick you in the balls. Even the misspellings and primary school grammar added to the sense of danger, like a street thug had found a typewriter and just started pounding his insane ramblings on it. Lawrence was airy and imagistic, Morton was visceral and in your face.

The book was thin. Virgil carefully flipped to the back page to see the number. If it was over a hundred and fifty, he'd eat the envelope it'd come in. Sure enough, 137 pages, big print, and enough white on the page you could doodle between the sentences. You could do that back then, have a "novel" that these days would barely count as a short story. Virgil had no idea when it'd become mandatory to write like you were getting paid by the word. Most of the best pulp works ever written had been getting paid by the word, and still clocked in shorter than the Great Gatsby.

He flipped it to read the back cover. In the same blood-red lettering as the title, only smaller:

"**She discovered the way to revenge...**
WAS WITH THE DEVIL'S OWN TOOL!"

Virgil snorted, muttered, "The devil's own tool." He wondered if whoever wrote the copy was in on the joke, or if it was some wage slave who genuinely thought they were helping this crap fly off the stands. Virgil thought that would've made a way better book cover, a cartoon Satan with a giant veiny red erection.

He read the synopsis, hoping it was just as goofy as the slugline:

Tina lived a life of quiet desperation, afraid of her own shadow...
until she found the book and said the words, awakening an ancient...
and very evil... machine. Now, she finally controls her life...
while everyone else is losing theirs.

"Boooo," Virgil said, shaking his head. He'd read about this one on the internet, of course; most of Morton's works were accounted for, though in spare detail. This one had sounded like it might be a half-decent "Carrie" rip-off, but this synopsis kinda put the bullet in those hopes. Doubtless there'd be plenty of cheerfully-rendered gore, and cheerleaders with sopping wet panties getting railed in exquisite detail, but if any heart or decent character work crept in there, Ken Morton would make sure to beat it to death with sloppy plotting. The build-up would be awesome, but then the climax would be abrupt and forgettable. Hell, he'd ended one book with a brain-slurping demon getting stabbed in the eye, black ichor gushing all over the hero's face... boom, the end. Did the hero end up divorcing the wife he still loved but was cheating on him? Did his daughter ever build up the courage to tell her parents about her unexpected pregnancy? Apparently, Ken Morton's answer was, "Who gives a good shit? Demon ichor, bro!" Later, some Morton apologists theorized it to be a printing error, omitting the pages that were obviously intended to be there. Others insisted it was an ironic statement about how unsatisfying modern genre fiction is. Still others thought it was Terry Lawrence mocking his audience, daring them to come back for more.

Some, like Virgil, thought it was because he got so drunk he forgot he wasn't finished before he sent it off.

Virgil felt a familiar pang in his stomach. He usually got that feeling after he'd spent a mountain of cash he didn't really have to pay for one of his geeky collector obsessions, and the juice of finally acquiring the thing had passed. It'd seemed too good a deal to pass up, a genuine first edition Ken Morton paperback, one that didn't have the covers torn off or pages missing, for only two hundred fifty bucks folding cash. It was one of the

few that hadn't been reprinted or turned into an ebook, so the only way to read the stupid thing was to get an actual copy.

But now his caveat was emptoring. Two hundred fifty bucks would've taken a decent chunk out of his credit card debt. Or paid for real groceries instead of yet another case of Top Ramen or Taco Bell takeout. Jesus, he could've asked Patty Giust from Human Resources out on a halfway impressive date, and when she shot him down, he could've bought an expensive bottle of whiskey to drown his sorrows. Man, anything sounded better right then than plodding through a shitty horror hack book.

But geek obsession was nothing if not compulsive and completist, and two minutes later, Virgil was sitting on his dogshit-smelling coach, the book perched on his lap, using his fingertips to gingerly spread it open, trying to do as little damage as possible in the reading of it. Which was ludicrous, the thing was in laughable condition, the spine was cracked and creased, pages were tanned and dog-eared, and the book had a weird warp to it, meaning it'd either been damp or left in the heat, or both. Terry Lawrence would laugh his ass off to see Virgil treating it like the Mona Lisa. Then throw up from drinking too much.

Virgil carefully turned to the first page, and began.

"Tina froze in her tracks as the scream pierced her brain..."

Hour One

The book was crap, that was pretty clear from the jump, but it certainly had that Ken Morton spirit. There'd been two pretty good fuck scenes already, and a grisly accidental power drill death. And Satan's Tool hadn't even shown up yet, hyar hyar. Despite himself, Virgil found himself pitying Tina, the beleaguered heroine, first losing her father in the power drill mishap, then suffering the indignities of being bullied at school. He was almost on the edge of tears, then the book inexplicably shifted into the POV of the mean girls tormenting her, ostensibly to show they were human and insecure, but mostly to provide an excuse for them to get fucked six ways from Sunday by their meathead boyfriends.

About a half hour in, Virgil became aware that he'd had an itch on his nose for awhile now, but had been too engrossed to scratch it. This was par for the course, he'd be marathon playing some video game, notice he had to piss, then two hours later, realize he'd never gone, and his bladder was

bloated to the bursting point. The thought made him snicker. He'd scratch his nose soon as he turned the page.

Well, the next page.

Hour Three

Virgil had gotten to the halfway point. The Devil's Tool had shown up at last. Tina had indeed read the words in the book, and boy howdy, had hell broken loose in that burg. Decapitations, disembowelings... one poor sap even had a rake shoved all the way up his backdoor, while his face got hacked off by a lawnmower.

Virgil realized he'd forgotten something, something he'd meant to do awhile ago. Did it have something to do with how feverish he felt? Shit, just what he needed, to get sick on his day off. He shifted in his seat, thought vaguely that his ass felt damp, probably from sitting too long and sweating. He turned the yellowed page with a ginger fingertip, pressing on.

It probably would've alarmed him to be told that he'd pissed himself. Twice. And that his body temperature was somewhere around one hundred and four degrees.

And rising.

Hour Nine

Something was wrong. Virgil knew it, and couldn't stop it. The book had him, held him firmly in its grip. He wanted to put it down, but couldn't take his eyes off its pages. He hadn't even been reading words for the last two hours, now it was just images flying through his brain, slowly melting it. He could feel the heat radiating out of his skull.

His legs hurt, sore beyond reason. He hadn't moved them in hours. He stank of shit and piss. He couldn't tear his eyes away to look, but if he could've, he would've seen his skin sloughing off in chunks, slopping to the couch. Blood dripped like tears from his eyes. Wasn't laughing about the Devil's Tool now, was he?

The book. The damn book was doing it to him. He knew it, and still couldn't stop it, couldn't tear himself away. Was Morton doing this to him? Revenge from beyond the grave, read the book and you die? But that was stupid, he'd be killing the only people that gave a shit about him. Maybe that was what he wanted? Kill the fans that kept Ken Morton alive, punish them for not appreciating Terry Lawrence?

It was hard to keep his thoughts together. The shit he was seeing now, the visions flashing on the backs of his eyes -- a mother brutally beating her infant daughter, a demon unzipping a man's chest, his innards dumping out, and on and on -- all the blood and murder and carnage repulsed him, and he'd asked for all of it, he'd wanted to read a bloody Ken Morton book, he'd paid for the privilege, and now, here it was, every gruesome thing that Ken Morton ever imagined and more. Was this what he saw in those last hours, before he blew his brains out?

He heard white noise in his ears then, like an air horn blasting. Blood dripped out of his ears. One ear was melting, dribbling down his neck with the blood, mixing into a waxy swirl.

Maybe it wasn't Ken Morton at all. Maybe it was something more obvious, like the guy who sold him the book infected it with something. Ricin, Anthrax, one of those fancy killer chemicals. But he'd never heard of symptoms like these. He couldn't see himself, could only imagine what he looked like, but he had a pretty good idea, and he started to cry then, tears mixing with blood. He should've asked out Patty Giust, he should've spent the money on women, or liquor, or good food, he should've done something, anything more with his life than buying stupid hack books. They were going to find him after he'd rotted away, the stink so bad the neighbors would call the cops, and they'd see how fat he was and the shithole he lived in, and they'd laugh, they'd laugh, goddammit, and they'd be right, because who the fuck died from reading a shitty 80s horror book?

He didn't know what he could do to save himself, but he had to do something, he couldn't just let this thing kill him. Jesus, if he looked half as bad as he felt, life wasn't worth living anymore, but he wasn't gonna lay down for a goddamn book. He'd wasted his life doing that already, maybe it was too late to take it back now, but the world was gonna know he fought, at least.

But how? Destroy the book? He couldn't even open and close his fingers anymore (the ones he had left, and it would've freaked him out to know how few there were). Maybe if he could get to the kitchen, he could use the gas stove to light the fucking thing on fire. God, that sounded so far away. The front door was closer, maybe he could just toss it out. But no, then somebody else might find it, a kid even, and whether the thing was haunted or poisoned, he couldn't curse somebody else with this.

He realized he was thinking too much. There was only one step required right now, only one thing that could save him.

He had to close his eyes.

They'd been open so long they were brittle and cracked. He didn't even know if he could see out of them anymore. But living in darkness for the rest of his life was better than seeing the shit he was seeing now. He focused, felt like he was driving a sixteen-wheeler going a hundred miles an hour and had to stomp down hard on the brakes. Slowly, every muscle in his body tensed and aching, he put everything he could into this one, tiny, all-important act...

With all of his might, he *squeezed.*

A bolt of pain lanced through his head. His eyes weren't even halfway closed. He'd felt something crack and flake off, maybe the front of one of his eyeballs. Every nerve ending felt like it'd been sliced with a scalpel.

But the images had slowed. The blood, the murder, it was murkier now, faded like an old VHS tape, the sounds that were so razor clear, now muddied and echoing.

He didn't want to. But he had to do it again. He clenched his body, and squeezed again.

He felt something inside of him burst, felt something slide out of his nether regions (he hoped he'd just shit himself again, and that it wasn't what he feared, his guts slipping out his asshole). But his right eye was closed, the other held open by gummy resistance. The images were dying now, he could barely hear them, the white noise was fading too, like tinnitus after a metal concert. God, if he could just do this, if he could just get in one last good squeeze...

He pushed with everything. His eyeball felt like it was being sawed off by his closing eyelid, but it finally shut with an audible crunch.

He collapsed on the couch, into a puddle of shit and blood and melted flesh. The book dropped to the floor by his bloated foot, the same one that'd kicked it earlier, now swollen three times its normal size, the skin tight and purple and shiny.

He awoke days later. It took hours of painful, punishing crawling on his melted body, but he was able to drag himself to the bathroom, pull himself up to the toilet where he kept a box of matches, and using two of his remaining fingers, slowly burned the book to ashes. It took many tries, as he

could only see out of one eye, and that one only barely, the tiny match flame hurt even being near his flayed skin, and the ozone singed his nostril cavity where his nose used to be.

He could swear as it burned, he could hear it screaming, but it was hard to tell with the piercing ring in his ears.

After another day's crawl, he made it to his phone on the coffee table and called the cops.

When they broke down the door and saw him, they initially thought he was dead, hacked up by some psycho.

The bookseller was investigated and released. There was no evidence that he had tainted the book.

Virgil lost his job. He lost over 100 pounds because food held no taste for him and the very act of eating was, itself, painful. His HMO provided him with a crappy wheelchair and cheap prosthetics. The prosthetics hurt so bad he stopped wearing them.

Of course, he found religion. It started at a local church, who took him into their fold despite his affliction, when no one else would have him. His fellow parishioners saw past the melted husk of his body, and saw the good, lonely man within. By then he had burned all his books, video games and DVDs in a manic frenzy. He started speaking at the church about the evils of entertainment. The likes of Ken Morton were top of his list.

His voice and message carried, naturally given weight by his startling appearance, and soon he was appearing regularly on the 700 Club. As his audience grew larger, the speaking engagements became more and more profitable. He was able to buy a shiny silver wheelchair to carry his damaged body, and shiny silver sunglasses to cover his ruined eyes. When he spoke of the Devil's Tool to full stadiums, he never laughed. He didn't laugh much anymore.

Now hundreds of women wanted to be with him, good Christian women. And it wasn't like he could sin with any of them, because his prick had melted off. Eventually, he married a beautiful God-fearing woman named Debra, who was relieved that he could never engage sexually with her, and she joined him in his crusade.

He had never had purpose like he had now. He was no longer plagued by guilt, or doubt, or any of the weakness that laid him low in his previous life. He had been through the fire, and the fire had made him strong.

And because of Virgil's speeches and loud calls to burn the "evil trash" that had tested him, Ken Morton enjoyed newfound fame. To read his books was to court death, or so the readers told themselves. Morton's resurgence made his widow and children rich.

The movie adaptation of "Blood Machine" opens this May.

The Flowers

Steve Jones

Malikov's wife was snoring again. He lay awake listening to the cyclic buzz-saw of her breathing. When he'd complained she'd replied, 'I do not snore, I have never snored, *you snore,'* and that was the end of the matter.

He turned to look at her profile silhouetted against the light from the window. In, out, in, out, in, drone, whistle, puff, out, puff, whistle, drone, in, went the slow, steady, maddening rhythm. Then he noticed something. With each exhalation a stream of tiny feathery shapes poured from her mouth. They tumbled and danced in the air above the bed before sinking gradually to the floor. He felt them tickle his face as they fell.

Four hundred kilometres above the earth the Space Shuttle Petersburg slowly approached the object, matching its velocity. Despite travelling at nearly thirty thousand kilometres per hour they seemed to hang together motionless against the blue curve of the Earth's atmosphere. The distance closed to thirty metres and Cosmonaut Valentin Paskhin tumbled out of the open doors of the cargo bay, maintaining direction using short bursts of nitrogen from his suit thrusters, his tether slowly uncoiling behind him. Reaching the object he grasped the cable, using the mass of Petersburg as a brake to stop within touching distance of its glistening surface. His voice rumbled in Kasparov's headphones.

'It's not one of ours, Commander.'

'Is it American?'

'No.'

The impossibility of the Arianne programme launching the massive satellite went through Kasparov's mind but he asked anyway.

'Is it European Space Agency?'

'No, I don't think so.'

'What you are trying to tell me Paskhin?'

'It could be some big joke but this thing does not look as if it came from Earth. It looks as if it came from somewhere else.'

'You think we've found an alien space ship?'

'You need to see it, commander.'

‘Can we get it into the cargo bay?’

‘Is that a good idea, commander? It might be dangerous.’

‘If we don’t take it, Paskhin, the Americans will. Do you want to watch them do it on CNN?’

By the time of federal approval to import the Russian flowers into the United States they had already become an internet sensation, cultivated in at least sixty countries around the world. The flowers Carla brought home were an iridescent, almost metallic blue.

‘What do you think of them?’ she asked Raul, her husband.

‘They’re fantástica darling – where did you get them?’

‘Wal-Mart. They have a whole stand full of them, all the same colour, but with different shaped petals. I decided to “mix and match”.’

He touched the flower heads. They were cool and soft.

‘Weird, they look artificial, but they feel real.’

‘They are real. Take care touching them, I think they have thorns, while I was there a little kid got spiked.’

In Colorado Springs, Cora Davila was holding a bunch of the flowers down in the sink and trimming the stalks. She hadn’t been able to find her scissors so she was using a paring knife. A sliver of stem sliced into the fat part of her thumb. She dropped the flowers and ran cold water over the cut washing away the blood. It wasn’t as bad as she’d feared. Through the pale skin of her palm she could see a tiny piece of green lodged in the wound. It didn’t hurt. If it hadn't been for the deep brown of the back of her hand she wouldn’t have known it was there. “It’ll work itself out” she thought.

Professor Ian Culver crouched over a patch of Bluebells in woodland in Hampshire, England. A shaft of sunlight made the flower-filled clearing glow with cerulean light. His American graduate-student, Lucy Shyler, was standing behind him, impatiently holding out a specimen jar.

‘Sometime today would be good, Ian,’ she chided.

‘Professor, or Professor Culver, please, Miss Shyler,’ he replied over his shoulder.

Lucy looked around. Everywhere the moss covered trunks emerged from a sea of dazzling blue.

‘Okay, Professor. Sorry.’

Culver continued his careful examination, pushing the stems from side to side with his pencil.

‘They’re not Bluebells,’ he said at last.

‘Sure they are, Ian– I mean Professor. This is a Bluebell wood.’

‘Perhaps it was last year, but not this year. I don’t know what these are, but they’re not Bluebells.’

She bent down to pick one. Instead of the smooth, damp, pliable texture she’d expected, the stem was dry and brittle. Her fingers slid up the coarse stalk. Snatching her hand away she sucked the welling cut inside her forefinger, staring at him wide eyed.

‘As I told you, Miss Shyler,’ he said, pulling on a pair of canvas gloves, ‘they’re not Bluebells.’

Four thousand miles away Patricia made a bracelet by poking the stems of “the picky flowers” through a strip of cardboard. To fix it to her wrist she used plenty of paper glue which made the flower heads wilt. She went through to show her mother.

‘What do you think Mummy?’ she asked, ‘do you like my design?’

Her mother looked up from her magazine.

‘I think it's lovely darling. It’ll be even lovelier if there’s not a lot of mess in the kitchen.’

‘There isn’t,’ Patricia assured her, flopping onto the sofa and looking for the TV remote. After an hour the flowers which had looked crushed looked fresh and pretty again. It seemed a shame not to keep her bracelet on. She was extra careful when she washed and brushed her teeth while getting ready for bed.

Later her mother sat next to her and, careful not to disturb her, began to lift the strip of cardboard from the child’s wrist. It came away easily, leaving the circle of flowers. She frowned and pulled at one. The skin lifted with the flower-head. The child moaned in her sleep. Surprised, she pulled harder. It snapped free of the skin. Blood oozed around a circle of embedded stem.

Malikov’s wife sat bolt upright in the bed.

‘What is it?’ she gasped.

‘There’s something coming out of your mouth.’

‘What do you mean?’

With each utterance, puffs of tiny seeds left her mouth to float in the air over the bed.

‘Look,’ he said, pointing at the dancing shapes.

She began to tear at the front of her nightdress, pulling it up over her pale soft belly. They both stared at the dazzling blue flower heads spreading upward and outward over her abdomen to a point just below her right breast. Not normally allowed to touch her naked flesh without permission, Malikov was now glad of the injunction. He stood alongside the bed, palms on the knees of his pyjamas, leaning forward, staring.

‘I have seen these before,’ he said eventually, ‘they look the same as the ones growing near the main gate. You have some in a vase downstairs. Did you pick them?’

‘Yes,’ she gasped.

‘Does it hurt?’

She grasped a handful of the flower-heads and tore them away from her skin. A fine spray of blood and plant material hit Malikov in the face. She screamed in agony and fell back on the bed clutching the flowers.

‘I thought they’d go away,’ she moaned.

‘Why didn’t you go to the doctor?’

‘And have everyone know our business? We have a position to think of, Serge,’ she wheezed, spurting fountains of seeds in time with her laboured breathing.

Three months later in Switzerland, a selected audience of scientific delegates stared at a PowerPoint slide.

‘As you can see,’ intoned Culver, ‘in this transitional stage the pteridophyte is becoming a flowering plant and produces seeds somewhat like thistle down, congruent with wind dispersal in our atmosphere. We call this incarnation, “Version 1.02”, or the “Vostochny Strain”.

From where he stood at the front of the auditorium he could sense their fear and confusion, taking grim satisfaction from it. Here was something they couldn’t dismiss as “soft science”.

A delegate on the conference floor stood and was found by the microphone boom.

‘Pridmore, Dryden Group Cambridge,’ he introduced himself. ‘Do I understand you as saying the adapting seeds germinate normally in soil?’

‘Yes.’

‘But if an animal comes into contact with the plant material they are infected?’

‘Correct.’

‘The plant grows and produces seeds in the infected animal’s body. The DNA of which is changed for subsequent generations?’

‘Yes, that’s more or less what happens,’ said Culver through the murmur that rose from the conference floor. ‘I should say the Russian experience of infected pets and farm animals was relatively short lived. Now only humans are affected.’

Another delegate stood. Pridmore gave way to him.

‘Gestler, Crop Physiology and Molecular Biology, Cornell. You said some people are showing up as immune.’

‘No, I didn’t say immune, I said “unselected.” There are no disease specific antibodies in their blood and they always come from a racial type previously infected. In a room such as this, with delegates from all over the world, some racial groups would be disproportionately affected. We don’t yet know why.’

‘Don’t you mean “Ethnic Group”, Doctor Culver?’

It was a woman. Some sort of feminist, Culver thought, no doubt the result of positive discrimination in science.

‘Professor Culver,’ he corrected her. ‘And I meant what I said. I’m sorry if it offends you but ethnicity refers to culture. We don’t believe the organism is interested in local customs. It is attracted to structural variation in the genome. As I’ve explained, the seed contains a massive complexity of DNA with no orphan strands, no wasted space at all. All the genetic material has a purpose and it is definitely programmed to finely discriminate between potential hosts.’

The murmur increased in volume. Several delegates were on their feet, talking and restless. No one was yet making for the exits.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ Culver interjected, ‘before we move on to the most important part of the conference, the workshops, I can take one more question.’

The boom found two young men and an older colleague. They looked startled at being selected. Culver appraised them coolly from the podium. The noise level fell as the senior member of the group addressed the microphone.

‘We’re from Lockheed-Martin, Professor. We’re engineers. I guess we’re wondering where we fit in all this.’

‘A good question,’ Culver complemented him.

He pointed to the screen still showing the cloud of cypselae. ‘This generation was called the Vostochny Strain because the first people infected by it worked at the Vostochny Cosmodrome. They included Irena, the wife of Chief Cosmologist Serge Malikov. It was he who alerted the international community, sadly, a little late.’

‘I’m still not sure I understand.’

‘Her infection developed from a sporophyte brought in by the Russians on some space junk, now believed to be of extra-terrestrial origin. You, gentlemen, are going to examine an alien space-craft.’

After a moment of shocked silence a chorus of mild swearing rose from the conference floor. Energised, the delegates began to shuffle toward the side entrances and the scientific workshops that might decide the fate of humanity.

The American engineers, Bruce Miller and Chas Goodman stood wearing Hazmat suits next to the incongruously white-coated Malikov.

‘I have already been exposed,’ he’d explained, ‘it would be a waste of time protecting myself now.’

Looming over them on steel trestles in a space shuttle service-bay was an irregular, nacreous white cylinder. Most of its palely iridescent surface was rippled as if melted but evenly spaced in four lines down its sides were perfectly formed glossy black domes. One end was closed with a dome similar to these but larger. The other end terminated in what looked like an exhaust port. Inside they could see closely-spaced black fins arranged radially around a central vent. In two bands near the front were small, spiracle-like vents around the circumference of the cylinder.

‘It looks like some sort of giant larvae,’ commented Goodman.

‘Many people have said so,’ Malikov agreed, nodding.

‘How big is it, Serge?’

‘Almost exactly twelve metres long by three metres in circumference, Doctor Goodman.’

‘That’s forty feet by ten. It looks pretty massive too. What does it weigh?’

‘Four metric tonnes.’

‘What’s that?’ asked Miller, pointing to an orange disk near the front.

‘A plastic seal we put in after using the laser. We tried putting a fibre optic camera into the vents but after a short distance we hit a dead end. The hull is non-magnetic, heat resistant and impervious to X-rays as well as any other imaging technology.

‘So you fired a laser at it?’

‘Yes, a weapons laser. It was the only way.’ He permitted himself a half smile, ‘it wasn’t impervious to that – although surprisingly resistant. It took almost a minute and filled the hanger with toxic gas. We had to vent it or the operators would have suffocated. Inside the hull was a partial vacuum so we assumed a low risk from particles entering our atmosphere.’

‘You assumed wrong.’

‘So events have proved.’

Malikov, Goodman and Miller were in the Vostochny board room hosting a secure videoconference.

‘It was an ark,’ Miller was saying in reply to a question from Washington. ‘We think it was still functional until the Russians burned a hole in it. The Biologists tell us the arthropods were alive when the ship was captured and brought to earth.’

Malikov pretended to examine his thumb on the polished table top.

‘”Arthropods”, what are they?’

‘The aliens, Mr Secretary, their bodies were segmented and they had three pairs of limbs.’

‘So they were insects?’

‘Not exactly, but their body structure was similar to our Earth insects, yes. We believe that if the orbit had been allowed to decay naturally the ship’s systems would have functioned normally and the four we have identified as the crew, as well as their eighty passengers, would have survived.’

‘Since almost twelve million people have died perhaps it’s just as well the Russians did “burn a hole” in the bug’s “ark” as you call it.’

Malikov nodded sagely. Goodman turned to him, irritated.

‘Perhaps they came in peace, Serge?’

‘Perhaps they did, I don’t know about that. I know my wife and two thirds of my staff are dead.’

The Washington link interrupted their exchange.

‘What more can you tell us about the biological agent that was released?’

‘Would you prefer a Russian guess or an American guess, Mr Secretary?' responded Malikov quickly.

‘We have arrived at a joint opinion on that,’ said Miller ignoring the jibe, ‘and Doctor Malikov is in full agreement. Am I correct Serge?’

Malikov nodded reluctantly.

‘This is not “guesswork”, Russian or American. It is scientific opinion. However, before we give it we need you to recognise that despite the best scientific and engineering minds on the planet being applied here we are still like Ancient Greeks finding a digital watch with a flat battery.’

‘I think we all take that as a given,’ came Washington’s reply. ‘Even so, what are your conclusions?’

‘We believe the flowers were intended as an element in their food supply. The craft has a cargo bay full of equipment to help them survive wherever they made planet-fall. It included specialised plant spores. Earth isn’t like the planet they came from and the “law of unintended consequences” operated.’

‘You believe they weren’t designed to cause harm?’

‘Correct, just to mimic the home planet conditions in any environment they encountered. It’s quite possible there were no mammals or birds on the arthropod’s home world.’

‘As I understand it, in the US and Europe the flowers are disappearing.’

‘Yes, the distribution is now restricted to mountainous regions. People have learned to avoid them, and of course there are public safety campaigns.’

The bluebells were back in Hampshire. Not as extensive as they’d been before the interlopers came, but isolated clumps of the native flora were beginning to reassert themselves, filling the May woodland with their heavy scent. Culver found his markers from the previous year and began taking the first sample. His new research assistant, Wei Lee, worked quietly at the other end of the clearing. In a queer way he missed Shyler. He was pleased she’d recovered when so many had died, but the illness had changed her. He was glad she’d moved on.

When she recovered Cora had blue eyes. At the hospital they told her the illness must have triggered a recessive from some distant ancestor. In a dark-skinned African American, the change had associations. It made her an embarrassment to her friends and neighbours. Her blue eyes created a good deal of male interest too, not all of it welcome.

Her new pale gaze also seemed to discomfit other teachers in her year group, most of whom were white.

'Are those lenses you're wearing, Cora?' asked one.

'No, it happened when I got the sickness, from the flowers.'

'But you're well now.'

'Sure. I'm fine now.'

Despite official assurances to the contrary, the belief had grown up that anyone who survived the toxin never really recovered. They were always "different" in ways less obvious than eye colour.

'I guess you see better now, than when they were dark,' said another.

'No, I don't. Mid-day looks like twilight to me. If I could see better I'd wear my sun-glasses all the time.'

She felt the heat more too, even in Colorado. And the weight of the atmosphere piled up fifty miles over her head seemed to press down on her. One day she volunteered to supervise a class trip to Pikes Peak. Stepping out of the car at the terminus she felt truly well for the first time in months. After that, she took the trip up there any time she could. She would spend all day on the barren rocky summit, sometimes looking down at low clouds over the plains.

'It's like this in Peru,' said a woman who sat down next to her at the viewing point. She looked like she might be Mexican or Native American.

'Pardon me?'

'In Peru, where I used to live, on the Altiplano, the land all around is like this. It is why I come here. My city is Puno. It is by the lake.'

'You must miss it.'

'I do, but there is no work there, unless you are a geologist or a mining engineer, or you know someone who can get you a job with the government.'

An idea began to form in Cora's head.

'What about teaching?' she said. 'I'm a teacher. Could I get a job there?'

'Hablar español?'

‘Si.’

‘Then yes, why not, you should give it try. Everyone speaks Spanish there. A lot of the people still speak Kechua, but you are an educated person, you could learn.’

On Friday afternoon Cora collected the homework assignments. Patricia was sitting in her usual seat at the front. Although she tried not to favour her, the American girl with the fair hair and blue eyes always drew her gaze. The bell rang for the end of afternoon school and the children left quietly as usual. Each one politely saying, ‘buenas señora,’ or ‘buenas tardes señora’ as they passed her. She knew most of them were off to do chores. It was so unlike Colorado where they would be picked up by a parent, and yet she felt at peace here, she could see and breathe.

‘Did you get sick too, Miss Davila?’ came the sudden question in English.

Patricia was still in her seat. She had to wait to be collected by her mother. She usually waited outside, chatting to Señor Contreras, the elderly School Care-taker.

‘Yes I did, Patricia,’ she replied, ‘what made you ask?’

‘Your eyes are like mine. They changed colour didn’t they?’

‘Yes, I think they did for everyone.’

‘Are you going to look at my picture?’

‘Yes, later.’

‘I’d like you to look at it now.’

The class assignment had been to draw a picture of an important place and to write a page describing what was in it. Karen took Patricia’s homework book from the pile and opened it while the child watched intently. The image on the page had been carefully painted with watercolours. It looked like two overlapping tan coloured diamonds on a pale blue field. The colour deepened towards the bottom below a spattering of blue dots. Above a sharply delineated centre line the background changed to pale pink, containing two white circles of different diameters. In the top left corner, the word “home” was written in thick, fibre-tipped pen.

‘Patricia, you’re from, Hope, Arkansas. This doesn’t look like anywhere in the United States to me.’

She saw disappointment in the child’s face and looked again. Then she got it. The diamonds weren’t diamonds, they were mountains reflected in a

lake. The white circles were moons. It occurred to her with deepening dread there should be three, one much larger and fainter filling a quarter of the sky. Then she saw it in the different density of pink Patricia had chosen.

'This is good, Patricia,' she faltered, not looking up. 'Perhaps we'd better keep it our secret for a while though.'

The child moved to stand next to her desk.

'We're not the only ones, Miss Davila,' she whispered. 'You should come down to the lake on Saturday morning. I'd love it if you could.'

The following day Cora took the bus down the Avenida Floral to the island. The carpark next to the lake was nearly full of foreign registered vehicles. Between the cars and the water, the ground was covered in the blue flowers, their scent filling the thin air. She could see Patricia's parents' microbus at the end of the row and walked cautiously towards it over the strip of bare earth between cars and flowers. Next to her, a man and a young woman with plague eyes began spreading a picnic rug over the blooms. As she looked at him horrified, the man smiled back at her.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'they can't hurt you. They don't cut anymore. They're just like regular flowers.'

He quickly picked a handful and held them out to her. 'See,' he said. 'I've never been sick and I'm not immune or anything. They're safe now.'

She took them gingerly. The stems, once hard and brittle, felt cool and soft.

'You must be Patricia's teacher,' said his companion. We've heard all about you. My name's Lucy, I'm an American too. I work at UNAP.'

'UNAP?'

'The university, "Universidad Nacional del Altiplano", in the Faculty of Agricultural Sciences,' she explained.

'You're studying the flowers?'

'All the time, they only grow above three thousand metres now. As you can see, they've changed. We think they've done what they were supposed to do.'

'Hello, Cora,' Patricia's mother was walking towards her from the lake.

'Welcome to our Saturday gathering.'

As they walked over to where her husband and Patricia were sitting, she said, 'Raul's a sponsor like me and Patricia's father. Only not so

fortunate, his wife died of the sickness.'

'I'm so sorry,' she said, 'I thought Raul was with Lucy.'

'He is. He just doesn't know it yet.'

'What did you mean by "sponsor"?'

'We have to prepare people,' she said, 'so they won't be afraid.'

'Afraid of what?'

Patricia arrived.

'Afraid of us of course, Miss Davila,' she said. 'Let's go for a walk.'

Taking Cora's hand, she led her over the flowers, stopping at the shoreline where the lake reflected the mountains in its glassy surface. In the pale blue sky the moon was still visible. One moon, not three – but the sight of it, the thin dry air and the sparse vegetation made her feel at peace

'Are we so different then, Patricia?' she asked, already knowing the answer, 'that people might be afraid of us?'

'I guess.'

'How many of us are here today, do you think?'

The girl glanced behind at the people sitting out on picnic chairs and travel rugs.

'Two hundred and eight, counting the new baby,' she replied, turning back.

'That's right – how did you know so quickly? And how do I know you're right?'

'We just counted I guess.'

Cora nodded.

'I guess we just did,' she said.

The Plague Doctor

Olivia Arieti

Repulsion, disgust, horror were not enough to describe the effects of the terrifying pestilence that swept over the countryside and sickened most of its inhabitants. The sun stopped shining to avoid the sight of such ignominious scenery and the moon constantly hid behind the clouds for fear that its feeble beams might shed an even ghastlier light than the one sprouting from the putrefied corpses. Darkness had prevailed, during daytime and night time all the same. It had penetrated the hearts of the living and the dead alike and evil found a most fertile soil; together with despair it spread as quickly as the disease itself.

Everyone, fearful of contagion, refused to help his more unfortunate partner and all tears were spared, for nobody ever dared to cry over a dying soul or bury the infectious body; the plague doctors, only dressed in costumes almost as horrifying as the pestilence itself, ran here and there trying to bring comfort and some sort of empirical cure to the ill.

Bryce didn't follow the example of his learned colleagues; obsessed by the fear of the bubonic spots, he preferred to remain in his turreted mansion waiting for better times.

The young physician was well aware of the extreme facility of contagion; his father, who was a practitioner as well, had warned him of the devastating and lethal consequences of the disease since he was a child and alimented his obsession; the boy more than once searched his own body almost maniacally to exclude any presence of the hideous buboes.

When the pestilence broke out, the first to lead the few physicians around was his father and consequently he was the first to go.

Bryce instead went almost insane; the disease had become his fiercest enemy with its invisible bacteria penetrating everywhere. The presence of rats obsessed him more than ever; his paranoid terror convinced him that they were the devil's instruments to spread the infection; poison was placed in every corner and incense burners kept working to purify the air and chase the malady's evil spirits away.

Lots of folks knocked on his door but he always turned his back to whatever cry of help and comfort.

The only person he admitted was Lorena, his fiancée. Marriage plans had already been made but they had to be postponed due to the plague.

Lorena was lovely, her carnation whiter than ivory, her lips as sweet as primroses; she represented a breath of freshness in such a putrid atmosphere. Most of all she satisfied all his needs and whims. The girl would sneak out at night time and reach him in the country chase where he had moved after his father's death; there immersed in lustful pleasure they consummated their love and waited for the first smile of dawn. Bryce complacently gazed at her immaculate body and freely let his hands caress the beautiful forms unstained by the dark reddish marks of the disease.

Unusually late one evening, Lorena made her fiancé feverish with impatience; the urge to hold her in his arms was driving Bryce mad. When the girl appeared on the threshold she was lovelier than ever; a green velvet cloak clad her sensuous silhouette; her eyes though, had a strange light; they betrayed an inner pain while slight shivers shook her body.

The fire was blazing in the small bedroom and the quilts were already pulled down. The many incense burners had spread an intense scent and the tripod flames provided a ghastly luminescence to the place.

Bryce, too blinded with passion to notice the girl's anxiety, hurriedly took off her cloak; at last he would satisfy his lust, lately the only way to quench his paranoid fears; her embrace mesmerised him completely and all senses were totally prey of its ecstatic bliss.

A horrified cry resounded in the room at the sight of the disgusting buboes that covered Lorena's arms.

"How could you?" the young man yelled horrified.

"I need your help, Bryce. You must try to save me and also come to the house where my father is dying," she pleaded faintly. Probably all her energy had been wasted on coming to the chase.

"You'd have me risk my health for a stupid old man?" he sneered, "Is that how much you love me?"

"Please, darling! Please, help us," the girl cried, desperate.

"You'll infect me," was his cold reply, "if you haven't already done it."

Terror and fits of anger had transformed his features. An uncontrollable fury alimented his glare; love had turned into horrid repulsion.

Almost prey of wild delirium, he started beating the poor girl culpable for contagion, the worst sin his insane mind could conceive; then he grabbed her fiercely and like a brutal ogre threw her into the fireplace as if that was the only way to annihilate the dreaded spectre of infection.

Then he undressed and also burnt his own clothes; naked as a jaybird he watched the flames devour the fragments of flesh and fabric all together. No heat though, was powerful enough to destroy the evil pestilence rooted in his heart.

The psycho spent the following days shut in the chase, continually examining his body to spot the slightest sign of his doom. Strangely no suspicious mark could be discerned; as days passed Bryce believed he was safe.

The young man ran into the habit of taking long walks in the countryside where the air was fresh and hopefully not infected; isolation and its consequent solitude was safer than the town's pernicious insalubrity.

He had returned from his daily walk and just kindled the fire when loud knocks banged on the door. They were so insistent that he couldn't ignore them. He cautiously opened and stepped back in front of the horrifying sight of the plague doctor. A scary long coat clad the man's lean body and his clothes smelled of camphor and oil. Most frightful was the bird-like mask with the bronze beak that made him look as an ominous messenger of death.

The practitioner walked in hurriedly as if expected.

"Where is she?" he cried, demanding.

"Who are you looking for, Sir?" asked Bryce, startled.

"I've been told there is a young girl lying here in need of my service," and he added gravely, "she is affected by the pestilence."

Then he started taking out of his bag repellent leeches, dried toads and lizards.

Bryce gazed at him petrified. However could the doctor have found out about Lorena's visit and illness? Cold sweat began running down his face. He had to think quickly and find an appropriate reply. Most of all he couldn't permit himself to be discovered. Certainly it was nothing but a mere coincidence; ill folks were disseminated everywhere and the doctor had received a wrong message.

“No sick girl dwells here, Sir. I believe you’ve got the wrong address,” he replied as calmly as possible.

The bleak fellow scrutinised him from head to toe, his eyes glowing as if inflamed by a hellish light, then he lifted his stick and pointed it at his chest. Bryce could feel the sharp point on his heart.

With a quick movement the doctor tore his shirt open; horrified, the young man distinguished an enormous bubo right over the heart; it was so swollen that it looked as if it was about to burst.

“Probably it was a sick *gentleman* who needed my service,” laughed wickedly the man of science and began tearing his clothes with the cane. Bryce, by now paralysed with fright, stood motionless as the hideous stick uncovered many more swollen spots.

Instantly a multitude of rats entered the room, running on the floor and up and down the walls; he could feel them already climbing up his back and running down his chest, their morsels horrifying injections of bacteria. The toads and lizards suddenly seemed to have turned back to life; their black eyes blinked at him maliciously while the leeches started crawling on his legs.

The executioner kept sadistically whipping the infected body till it was all covered with blood as if waiting for a cry of repentance that never arrived.

The foul smell of death had already invaded the room.

Then he extracted an iron stick from his bag and once it was ablaze began burning the open wounds of his patient.

“I’m sure you recognise the scent of burnt flesh, Bryce, I’m sure you do,” the doctor sneered.

The young man immediately feared to be thrown into the fire that never had glowed so brightly.

As if reading his mind the practitioner remarked, “Now I’ll let you spend your agony gazing at the flames, an anticipation of the fires of hell where your evil soul is expected.”

Another coarse laughter followed before the ghastly doctor vanished from his sight.

The Reaper's Scythe

Bruce Markuson

"The Reaper stood with scythe in hand. And cast his vengeance upon the land.
Why the Death Winds had to blow.
Do not ask me. I do not know.
Why all before it would flee and fly. And all who stayed would starve and die.
Do not ask me. I don't know why.
Now famine is where the Death Winds blown. For nothing else has ever grown.
Do not ask. It is not known."

Steven was a deeply troubled man of forty. He took a sip of his large cup of coffee and then closed his eyes after he recited the poem to himself. He brushed back the gray hairs on his head and scratched his three-day-old beard while he searched for an aspirin to cure his headache. The lines on his face were evident. He looked much older than a forty-year-old should look.

"Is that Crazy Walter's poem?" His twelve-year-old, pigtailed stepdaughter interrupted Steven. She had a cute little freckled face with a look of deep anger in her eyes.

"Steven, why can't I go to the outside?" asked the young girl.

Steven put down his coffee on the crowded desk of his makeshift little office in his apartment. He shuffled some papers aside and searched his disorganized office for his lunch. He picked up a can of beets with a fork in it and started eating while looking at the girl standing there with arms folded and a stern look on her face.

"Yellow, you are too young. We talked about this. You have to stay in the bunker."

Her eyes filled with tears as she shouted back, "My father would have let me go. I am older than you were when you came into the bunker." Then Yellow stomped out of the room. Steven walked out of his office after her into his apartment with the can of beets in hand. It was too late. Yellow had

walked out of the front door of the apartment. The apartment was quite a bit neater than his office. It was just an old steel shipping container with some wooden crates and plastic barrels used as furniture.

“Why do you eat these? I know how much you hate them,” Jane stated as she stared at him with her green eyes.

Steven’s wife, Jane, was a much younger woman of twenty-seven. She was very beautiful. She finished braiding her long blond hair and quickly stood up, wearing a homemade dress. She grabbed the can of beets out of his hand because, God knew, he was just going to spill it after she had just cleaned up the place.

“Because they are nutritious, and we have thousands of them. Besides, no one else seems to want to eat them.“

“I will talk to her,” Jane said.” Right now the thought of going outside this bunker is the most exciting thing in her life.”

“No, let me be the bad guy. No sense in having her mad at you also. She will need someone to confide in.”

Jane smiled. “Listen to yourself, Steve. You really do care. You’re a good father. A better father than her real father ever was.”

“Jane, we discussed this already. I don't want children.”

“I was just saying."

Steven started walking out of the apartment. “I have to brief the outside crew on the mission now. Then I will be in the lab all day.”

As Steven was walking out the door, a heavy-set, bearded man in his fifties wearing a plaid flannel shirt stood in his way. He was holding two young boys by their shirt collars. One boy had a black eye, and one was nursing a bloody nose.

“John, what’s up?”

“Mr. President, these two have been fighting over this.” John held up a can of peaches while still holding onto one of the boys' collars.

Jane was standing beside Steven and spoke up, “Is that a can of peaches? Nobody has seen one of those in over a year. I thought we had eaten them all up. Everyone will want that.”

One boy shouted, "I found it!”

The other boy shouted back, “It was with my dad’s stuff. He put it there before he died.”

Steven interrupted, “Enough. Plan ‘A’. I will split the can up between the two of you. Or plan ‘B’, I will take the can to the kindergarten and split

it up among the children. What will it be?" A short pause of silence. "Settled. Jane, take this to the kindergarten. Now, you boys, go get yourselves cleaned up."

The two boys walked away, both regretting their choices and angry at each other.

John spoke up, "Stevo. The nuclear reactor. As you know, it is from a Los Angeles Class submarine. It was fueled thirty years ago and has two years left on the existing rods."

"You know Jack," John continued. "He is seventy-six years old. The doctor told him he has about a year to live. He said he is willing to change the rods in the reactor. That will be an improv job. He might eat a lot of radiation. I will be honest with you. In his state, it will probably kill him. I say, we let him do it. If not, it will just be someone else two years from now. "

"Oh, God almighty! We are going outside tomorrow," Steven said. "I don't need to think about this right now."

Jane grabbed a rusty can opener. "Steve, you eat this. You can't work twelve hours a day in the lab and then try to solve everyone's problems."

"No, no, no. I took it away from the boys to avoid a fight. Not to start a new one with everyone else in the bunker. Jane, take it to the kindergarten class. I need to brief the crew now. John, let's go."

Grabbing his cup of coffee, he left the room. The two of them walked past several steel shipping container apartments under a dark stone sky. A few people waved at them from the open doors of their apartments. In the bunker, food and clothing were not purchased. Clothes were simple hand-me-downs, unless you made them yourself. Often canned food did not need to be cooked. When food was cooked, it was usually something they grew themselves in their hydroponic gardens that too often was not enough for everyone. Old canned goods had to make up the difference. Time was not measured by sunrise and sunset, and life in the bunker moved at a slow, methodical pace.

All around them were the visual scrape marks in the rock made by mining equipment when the tunnels were dug out. It was only lit by a line of light bulbs along a steel conduit, bolted to the ceiling. The two of them entered a three-storey concrete building. It was a large cube of concrete with windows on the side. Steven turned on the lights and found Yellow sitting in the hallway, crying.

Steven abruptly said, “Yellow, I am sorry. I am very sorry. You are exactly right. You are two years older than I was when I entered this bunker. Let me tell you all about why we are in this bunker. Walk with me. I am going to talk to the outside crew.”

Steven walked down a long corridor. Yellow followed behind him. He turned the corner into a dark hallway. The air in the hallway was stale and smelled of moldy drywall. The paint was peeling off the walls, and water stains were everywhere. Steven saw a large cockroach run by and did not bother to step on it. Four young men were standing at the end of the hallway under one bare, dim light bulb on the ceiling. It was so dark they could barely be seen. They were standing in front of a door covered with old paper. Yellow stood there, not entering the hallway.

“Steven, we were told never to enter this hallway,” Yellow said in a voice of fear.

Steven turned around. “Yellow, we are changing the rules. Remember, we are going ‘outside’ now?”

One of the young men called out to him, “Steven, why are we meeting here? Nobody ever comes down this hallway.”

Steven answered, “You see that door with the paper taped over the armored glass? That is where Crazy Walter locked himself in.”

Jane turned the corner right behind him. “Steve, what is wrong, what is it that you are not telling me?”

As they got closer, the four men came into view. Now that Steve and John were there, all six members of the outside crew were now present in the hallway. The other four members were bearded, scruffy men in their late teens and early twenties. They looked like they were not that important to the operations of the bunker. John had chosen then because they were not married and had no children and no family. They were expendable.

Steven stated, “Carl, James, David, Tom. You boys ready for tomorrow? It might be kind of rough out there.” One of the men who was about seventeen years old had long messed up hair and was barely growing a beard. He looked very scared.

“James, you okay?”

“I’m fine. I’m ready to go.” James did not look Steven in the eye. There was no conviction in his voice.

”John, you were around then,” Steven said. “Do you want to tell the story of Crazy Walter?”

”Stevo, you were elected president of this bunker. That is your job. Are you sure you want to talk about this in front of your stepdaughter? Maybe we shouldn’t talk about it.”

Yellow snapped, “I am old enough!”

Steven tore down the faded yellow paper taped to the armored glass door, which revealed a dried-up corpse holding a bottle of whiskey in one hand and a small revolver in the other. He was slumped over a desk in an armored glass control room. The room had a complete view of an underground highway, full of semi trucks and shipping containers leading to one enormous armored door.

“Yellow, as you have so correctly reminded me, you are two years older than I was when I first entered the bunker. Thirty years ago I was ten years old. After my mom died, it was just my dad and I. He was a trucker, so I went with him on his routes. One day we heard on the news of some small villages in East Asia that were losing their crops to a virus. It was a cruel, cruel virus called the Reaper’s Scythe. The Reaper or the Grim Reaper is in reference to the fourth horseman of the apocalypse or the Angel of Death. The scythe is a long, curved blade on the end of a stick used for harvesting plants. Or, in the case of the Reaper, for harvesting souls. The Reaper’s Scythe virus is completely harmless to humans and animals, but it is a cellulose-eating virus that eats plant matter. The name could not be more apropos.”

The light in the hallway flickered. Everyone looked up for a second.

Steven continued, “Nobody knew where it came from. People sent food from all over the world to help the villages. I remember saving cans to send to them. Then the virus mutated to an airborne virus. The wind blew it to other crops. It consumed the crops and multiplied and moved on again. And thus the Death Winds came. We knew it was just a matter of time before the virus encompassed the entire planet Earth, and everyone would starve to death.

“Dr. Ross, Colonel Riker, and Bob hatched a plan. They are all dead now. Dr. Ross was the world’s foremost authority on viruses. He had some secured samples of the virus in a canister. He was sure that, given time, he could come up with an anti-virus or a predatory virus that would be similar in its DNA structure but would eat off the Reaper’s Scythe virus. It would consume two or three of the Reaper’s Scythe viruses and then multiply. Eventually, the Reaper’s Scythe would go extinct. But it could take years to

develop the predatory virus, and they only had days. So he worked out a deal with Colonel Riker, who was a nuclear engineer and responsible for this bunker."

One of the guys from the crew interrupted. "If the virus is harmless to humans, why can't we all just go outside?"

Steven replied, "Carl, if we open the armored door without isolating the rest of the bunker, all of our food, all of our hydroponic gardens, and all of our seed samples will be destroyed. Then we will all starve to death."

Yellow stood back for a moment in shock.

"Originally, this bunker was a mining facility. Corridors go on for miles, all branching off the main corridor, or, as we like to call it, the underground highway. You see all the semi trucks. You could drive a mile down the corridor, turn around, and come back out. Then the mine was converted to a cold war bunker. Then into a secret prison. It was mothballed and almost forgotten about. Colonel Riker restarted the nuclear reactor and brought the bunker back online. It provides us with all the power we need for electricity, air, heat, water purification, and sewage disposal for generations to come. Then there was Bob. Bob owned a chain of discount stores and supermarkets. He arranged for the entire distribution warehouse to be moved here. Hundreds of shipping containers full of canned food. Dry goods and military packaged food. Plus all of Dr Ross's equipment and the entire university's atrium and its entire seed collection. That was all moved to this bunker."

"So how did you get stuck in here?" Carl asked.

"My dad was a trucker working for Bob. One day we drove for miles through a thick, dark forest of trees. It was just one lonely road leading to nowhere, completely surrounded by huge old trees. Until, all of the sudden, the road ended at an enormous armored door in the side of a mountain. It was so big my dad could drive the truck through. We drove into the bunker at eleven o'clock that night.

Bob told my dad, 'Go back to the warehouse for another load right away. Come back as soon as you can.'

We had no idea why we were here or what was here. But my dad quickly figured it out.

My dad said to Bob, 'I have been driving for sixteen hours straight. And I will still be driving until two in the morning. I want double-time pay for this.'

Bob said, ‘Okay, just get going.’

My dad climbed up into the truck and whispered to me in the cab, ‘I know the guy at the warehouse called Bob just before we left. He told him the warehouse is now empty. Bob would not pay double-time if his life depended on it. Sneak out the back window and run as far as you can into the bunker and hide.’ My dad soon followed me. Once the main armored door was shut, we came out of hiding. They sealed the door from the inside with that protective foam. I breathed a sigh of relief. We were safe from the outside. They were not going to open it to let anyone in or out after that. Then Walter, a.k.a. “Crazy Walter,” came down and tried to open it. Walter was a security guard here when it was a prison, so they brought him back here. He used to work in the main control room, overseeing the trucks come in and out. His family was on the outside. They tried to catch him and restrain him, but he ran to the main control room and locked himself in. We did not have the combination or the equipment to cut him out.”

Jane interrupted, “All of my life, I have heard just a word or two about him and nothing more. No one wants to talk about him.”

“Crazy Walter was in the main control room. He had access to the communication equipment. He called his family and anyone else he knew to tell them about where the bunker was. They came to the bunker. Walter turned on the security cameras and microphone outside the bunker’s armored door and showed it on all the video screens and intercom system throughout the bunker. He also opened up lines of communication throughout the tri-state area. We covered up the video screens, but we could not stop the voices over the intercom. This used to be a prison. The speakers are buried deep in the concrete ventilation system, so we could not get to them to shut them off. Eventually, Walter got drunk. He recited his infamous poem over the intercom for everyone to hear. And then he shot himself. But he left the communication system on.“

Steven stayed silent for a second.

Yellow spoke up, “What? What is it? Why don’t you want to talk about Crazy Walter?”

Steven took a breath and said, “We were able to cut the power to the main control room, but it had a battery backup. A huge military battery backup. When people screamed to come inside the bunker, we did nothing. When the Death Winds came, we did nothing. When people started to fight and kill each other, we did nothing. After a month of eating canned goods

and whatever animals they could find on the outside, they started to get hungry. There were no monsters out there, just ordinary people like you and me, who were starving. But can you imagine what ordinary people would do to each other when all food, everywhere, is utterly and completely gone! Especially after a few weeks when the hunger pains kick in?"

Jane shouted, "Stop, stop, just stop right there! Yellow does not need to hear any of this!"

"Mom! I am old enough. I will hear about this eventually."

John stated, "Stevo, why did you have to go bring that up? All this time, and it is still haunting you."

Steven continued, "I would wake up to screams in the night. Thinking it was a nightmare, only a nightmare. Nothing more than a nightmare. But, no, it was actually screams in the night for several weeks. I had to take powerful sedatives to get to sleep back then. I was just a little boy hearing their screams echo through the bunker.

Steven screamed out, "And we could not shut those damn speakers off!"

Every one stood there a second, watching Steven.

Jane grabbed Steven's hand. "Steve, it's okay."

Steven closed his eyes. He let out a breath and recomposed himself. "Later, we heard explosions outside of the main door. The door was built for a nuclear blast. It did not budge. However, we were told that it might have been damaged enough so that we would be unable to open it. Then the batteries in the control room went dead, and for a few days, we heard a low static and then silence. We saved our lives but lost our souls. Redemption was for the next generation. Maybe Walter was the only sane one in the bunker."

Suddenly the lights went out. It was pitch black. Yellow screamed. The lights came back on. Steven was hugging Yellow with his left arm. And with his right hand he was screwing in the light bulb. "Yellow, we are safe. Don't worry. It is my fault. I had just put the light bulb in. I should have screwed it in better. Nobody ever comes down this hallway."

Jane asked, "What did you do after that?"

"After that, I became a student of Dr. Ross and dedicated my life to the eradication of the Reaper's Scythe virus. And still I have absolutely no idea where it came from."

Steven looked at Yellow. “It is truly a blessing for you, Yellow, to have been born after that.”

Steven finished his coffee and looked at the bottom of his cup with disappointment. “Now, I want everyone to understand. We will meet at corridor door number four tomorrow at 8 a.m. All of the other doors to the underground highway have been sealed. Once we are in the underground highway, we will seal the door behind us. We have all the food and supplies we need in the shipping containers on the underground highway. After that is done, then we can open the main armored door. I hope that we will be able to open the door. After about ten years, I believe that I have prepared enough sample of the predatory virus to do the job. The virus is very voracious. Currently, it is frozen in glass jars. Kept in a dormant state. If it is too clustered when released, it will destroy itself. So it must be spread over a wide area. We also have bags of seeds, fungus, and algae samples. Our mission will be to release the predatory virus over several square mile areas and plant seeds as we go. We may have to camp out for several months. We will not be let back in unless the mission is successful. If we need help, no one can come out. Does everyone understand that? I will be in the lab all day today.”

Yellow stated, “I don’t want to go to the outside anymore.”

The crew dispersed and started walking down the hallway.

Later that day Jane was working in the atrium. It was a large dome structure full of all types of plants that were saved and preserved from devastation by the Reaper’s Scythe. Steven wandered around, looking for Jane. He came across a dandelion and ripped it out of the soil.

Jane shouted at him, “How could you do that? I just planted that flower a few days ago. It is a beautiful flower. I named my daughter after that color of yellow.”

“I am sorry. When I was a kid, my father had guys bring a huge truckload of chemicals to our house and sprayed our lawn to kill those things. Anyway, I need another plant sample for the lab.”

Jane looked at him and gestured with her hand at the flower he had just picked. “Thank you” was all Steven said.

As Steven walked out of the dome, Jane stopped him in his tracks, “I know you are under a lot of stress, but this is eating you up inside. Remember what the doctor said about your heart. You were just a little boy then. What happened outside the bunker was not your fault. You cannot take

the entire burden of humanity on yourself. Is this why you don't want to have children? Once the predatory virus is released, everything will be fine."

"I don't know that!" Steven quickly looked around and saw that there was nobody else there. He grabbed his head and ran his hands over his face. "I don't know if it will work," he whispered. "I can only test it in the lab. I am not sure if it will work on the outside. You can't tell anyone about this."

Steven continued, "And now I am taking the entire burden of humanity on myself. If the predatory virus fails, it will be my fault. And if it does fail, we will run out of supplies. Then one day what happened outside of the bunker and all over the world, for that matter, will happen to the around four hundred of us inside the bunker. There was at one time over six hundred people in this bunker. The human race is dying out."

Jane tried to calm him down. "Steve, it can't be that bad."

"Look, we are having fistfights over the last can of peaches today. A lousy can of peaches. Someday we will be killing each other over the last can of beets if we don't get out of here. And that is why I don't want to have children." Steven grabbed the door to the atrium to close it.

Jane yelled, "Stop! Those hinges are rusty." The heavy steel door made a screeching sound and broke its hinges. Steven found himself on the floor. He was screaming in pain. He looked down and saw the door on his leg with his shinbone bent at an odd angle.

The next morning Steven was at the number four door of the corridor wearing a cast. People had gathered to wish the crew good luck. The five other members of the crew were standing by the door. Jane was handing out large burlap bags to the crew. James, the youngest member of the crew, was looking terrified.

Jane put her hand on his shoulder, "James, it will be fine."

Next to the door was a small freezer plugged into a long extension cord. On top of the freezer were a few small cardboard boxes.

"Are we ready to go?" Steven asked.

John spoke up, "No, you can't come with that cast on. We will handle it."

"All I need is a little help getting around."

John snapped, "I sure as hell ain't going to carry you. Look at you. You can't even stand. We need to go. We are losing sunlight. We will communicate with you tonight over the walkie-talkie."

Steven hobbled and blocked John's path. "This is my life's work and my responsibility!" Steven shouted. "I have to go!"

"Stevo!" He paused for a moment "You are not going to save the whole world all by yourself. Don't let this thing kill you. You have already had a heart attack over this. You have already explained to us what we need to do." Steven tried to stand and quickly fell over.

John helped him up. "We will be fine. You stay here and take it easy."

Steven managed to sit on the floor and open the freezer. He carefully pulled out six frost-covered jelly jars, one at a time. They were each half full with an oily liquid. Steven painstakingly put each jar in a box and put some padding around them.

"Guys, I can't tell you how important this is. It will thaw in an hour or two. Make sure it is well dispersed."

The crew left and sealed the door behind them.

"Please help me to the main control room." Steven said. Steven was helped up to the main control room. He looked through the window of the main control room. The crew was able to open the armored door. Steven breathed a sigh of relief. A burst of sunlight filled the main corridor. A massive wind blew, and a dust cloud poured in. Steven could only get a sideways view of the door. He was not able to see outside. Then the crew covered their faces and fought against the wind to get outside.

John's voice came over the walkie-talkie. "God help us, it's all gone. Everything is gone. It's an alien world out here. The dust storm, the wind. The environment has changed. The wind is just too strong. We are coming back..." Then nothing else was heard. Later that night there was no communication from the crew. No one showed up in the doorway. No one knew what to do next.

That night Steven stayed outside of the main control room, staring at the armored door open to the outside.

Jane came up to him. "Steve, let me help you get back and get some sleep. We will look out again in the morning."

"No, I am going to stay here all night, but could you find Jack and tell him to go ahead and change the fuel rods?"

By the next morning the crew was written off. As Steven was heading back to his apartment he heard a gun shot echo throughout the bunker. As he struggled to walk, Jane pointed to one of the shipping container apartments.

A woman with tears running down her face came up to Steven and grabbed him, “David! Where’s David?!”

Steven could only point to the shipping container. The woman tried to run towards it but Steven held her. He was unable to hold her back and let her go. She ran into the container and let out a scream. Steven hobbled his way towards the container then another gunshot echoed through out the bunker.

He said with regret, “I should have seen it in her. I should have known better. I could have tried harder to hold her back.”

Jane responded, “Steve, don’t blame yourself. It’s probably for the best.”

Steven asked, “Is this what we have come to?”

Jane answered with conviction, “Yes.”

Steven stood there silent then said, “Now we’ll live in our purgatory and finish out our lives. All of my life’s work. All that I’ve done. It’s all over!”

Jane continued, “Steve, you did everything you could. You put you heart and soul into this. You nearly worked yourself to death over this. There’s nothing, I mean nothing, more you could’ve done. Some day you can face your maker and say, ‘I tried.’ Stop blaming yourself.”

The two of them heard a small commotion. As Steven and Jane turned the corner they saw a small crowd of people. There was an older man with messed up black hair and a three-day-old beard. He was wearing an old worn out lab coat. He was handing out small handfuls of pills to people from a large pharmaceutical bottle.

As Steven got closer he called out, “Doctor, what are you doing?”

The man gave him a cold stare, then turned away.

Jane interrupted, “Steve let it go. Just come with me and let it go. “

The next morning it was found that thirty-two more people were dead. Steven spent the morning talking to people.

By the end of the day he decided to call everyone together to make an announcement. All of the raggedy clothed, sullen faced people of the bunker had gathered under the stone sky among the shipping container apartments.

Steven spoke to the now less than four hundred people, “The crew is lost. No new communication has been received. As agreed we will not be sending any one else out there to die looking for them.

“I’ve been speaking with a lot of people. Almost everyone I’ve talked to has agreed with me on this. Though we have enough supplies for a few more generations it seems that there is a consensus. From now on, no new children will be conceived. We may die as old people or chose to take our own life. But we will not starve to death or kill each other over the last scraps of food. Nor will we doom the next generation to that fate.

Steven paused, “I do not know if I should say this. I do not know if I should even try. It might be wrong of me. But I will start on a new batch of predatory virus. Perhaps maybe if the outside environment… We could… We’ll see.”

A voice came from the crowd, “Steve, it’s ok. Just give it up. Just don’t.” Then that voice faded off.

Jane took Steven away by the arm and said to him, “Why Steve? The outside crew was our last hope. Why torment people with hope when you should prepare them for the inevitable?”

“Jane, you’re absolutely right. But still, I’m going to start a new batch in the morning. I have to try. ” The crowd dispersed. No other announcement needed to be made.

* * *

As time passed there were no new babies born. As children grew older the kindergarten was abandoned. Many of the older people had died off or had chosen to take their own lives. For some that was the end. But for most it was life in the bunker as usual. Nothing else had changed.

One day Steven was sitting in his laboratory.

Jane walked in and said, “Steve, you wanted to see me.“

Steven told Jane, “Even if we could survive the harsh outside environment, there’s not enough supplies to finish the new batch of predatory virus. I don’t know how I should break the news to everyone.”

Then suddenly, Yellow walked into the laboratory. Jane had just redone Yellow’s hair a few hours before. The new hairstyle had put a smile on her face. It had been so long since Steven had seen her smile. But the image of that little pig-tailed girl was gone. She was now fifteen and turning into a beautiful young woman, destined for a life sentence in the bunker.

It broke Steven’s heart to have to tell her, “Yellow, I’m so sorry. The new batch of predatory virus…”

Yellow interrupted, “Steven, I’m supposed to tell you. There’s this like green stuff on the glass outside of the control room.”

Steven could only say with bewilderment, “Green!?”

Steven ran up to the main control room as Jane followed.

Jane recognized it right away, “That is fungus. It is some of the same fungus that I gave the crew. And look down there in the cracks in the concrete outside of the armored door. That is a dandelion.”

“I have to go out there.” Steven gathered some equipment and had himself sealed in another hallway leading to the main corridor. Then he went outside. A few days went by.

Steven knocked on the glass of one of the doors and spoke over the walkie-talkie. “Open the door. There is no trace of the Reaper’s Scythe.”

Steven took Jane by the hand and walked her outside. The sun was rising through hazy dust. A gentle wind blew, and it carried a moldy, musty stench.

Jane had to cover her nose. “Oh God, that stinks.”

“Just breathe it in. It is the smell of life, and it has returned. Planet Earth is alive again. God has given us a second chance.”

As far as the eye could see over a flat plain, there were small green puddles where tree roots used to be. Patches of green grass, and everywhere there were beautiful yellow spots of dandelions.

Steven looked at Jane. “I think it is time we have children. Let’s have lots of children.”

Plagued by the Grim Reaper

James Tierney

Driven and impatient
He didn't anticipate a long life
Hoping the worst might never happen
He knew that in that ring of roses
They would all eventually fall down
Lost with no bearings
In a landscape
Without remorse or pity
The reaper had his purse strings
If not his money
At a door with a cross on it
He hesitated
Like all those not ready for Hell
He suffered the smell of his own gases
Before stepping into
What was a proud fortune for a thief
Unlikely to feel the rush
Of his blood turning sour
He fell on the sword he lived by
Outbid by the devil
God had long since given up
On what was once his.

ABOUT OUR AUTHORS:

Benjamin Welton is a freelance journalist, fiction writer, and sometime poet who lives in Burlington, Vermont. His work has previously appeared in **The Atlantic**, **Schlock! Webzine**, **The Airship Daily**, **Crime Magazine**, **Thuglit**, and many others. He maintains a blog called **The Trebuchet**, plus he's currently working on a novel.

Lawrence Dagstine is a 40-year-old writer born and raised in the Big Apple. He studied journalism and creative writing in the 90's, and is workshop-certified in proofreading. His work is available on Amazon, Nook, Apple, Kobo, and in a variety of other formats. He is best known for his small press stories—publication in a plethora of science fiction, fantasy, and horror magazines during the 2000's (what he affectionately labels the Millennial Pulps, before digital became mainstream). He mostly writes video game reviews and comics these days, and offers affordable proofreading services. He is the author of a half dozen ebook novelettes and novellas (including *Family Reunion* & *A Child Weeps in Moscow),* has been published with companies such as Damnation Books and Steampunk Tales, and is the author of two out-of-print collections and two upcoming: *Death of the Common Writer* (out of print), *Fresh Blood* (out of print), and in 2015, *From The Depths* (co-authored with illustrator Bob Veon), and *My Own Private Earth* (SF). He is currently shopping a satirical novel around to a new agent. He enjoys Walking Dead, Doctor Who, collecting action figures and comic books. Reach him on Facebook, Twitter, Linkedin, or other popular apps through social media. Visit his fan page at: www.facebook.com/lawrence.dagstine.2

Alex S. Johnson is a former English professor and music journalist (Metal Maniacs, Zero Tolerance, etc.) currently living in Sacramento, California. His books include The Death Jazz, Wicked Candy, Bad Sunset and Outlaw Circus.

John Vicary began publishing poetry in the fifth grade and has been writing ever since. A contributor to many compendiums, his most recent credentials include short fiction in the collections "The Longest Hours", "Midnight Circus", "Something's Brewing" and "Temporary Skeletons". He has stories in upcoming issues of Disturbed Digest and "Dead Men's Tales". John enjoys playing piano and lives in rural Michigan with his family. You can read more of his work at keppiehed.com.

Mark Slade has had stories published with *Burial Day Books*, *Wordhaus*, *Blood Moon Rising*, and is in vampire anthology, *You can't kill me--I'm already dead*. His latest book (*A Six Gun and the Queen of Light*) has just been released by Horrified Press. He lives in Williamsburg, Va, with his wife and daughter.

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and poet. He has been published in such titles as *The Horror Zine Magazine*, *SNM Horror Magazine* and *The Poetry Box*. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press, such as... *Just One More Step*, *Tales of the Undead - Suffer Eternal Anthology series: Volumes 1-3 and the Tales of the Undead - Hell Whore Anthology series: Volumes 1-3*. Homepage: http://mathiasjansson72.blogspot.se

Shaun Avery is a crime and horror fiction fan whose love of comics and books inspired him to pick up a pen at an early age, from which point said pen has barely left his hand. He has been published in local newspapers, and has won writing competitions in the medium of fiction, non-fiction and comic scriptwriting, and was also recently shortlisted for a screenwriting contest. Numerous anthologies and magazines have accepted his work, and he is now waiting with increasingly limited patience as they approach the printing presses. For reasons probably best discussed with a psychiatrist of some sort, he is particularly drawn to subject matter such as the one shown in this story, both as a writer and a reader. He doubts he would make such a successful zombie himself, however.

Matthew Wilson, 30, is a UK resident who has been writing since small. Recently these stories have appeared in *The Horror Zine*, *Star*Line*, and *Sorcerers Signal*. He is currently editing his first novel and can be contacted on twitter: @matthew94544267

Originally born and raised in the bowels of Connecticut, **Doug Rinaldi** graduated college in 1995 and received a degree in Computer Animation and Special Effects for stage and screen. However, writing dark fiction had always been his passion. At the turn of the millennium he joyously bid CT a final farewell and relocated to Boston where he has been honing his writing skills ever since. Currently, Doug's work can be read in various anthologies from such publishers as Static Movement, Wicked East, Sirens Call – to name a few. Also, currently available through Amazon are his two e-book anthologies titled "Manuscript of Deviated Truths, Volume I" and "Volume II".
Next on his agenda is putting the finishing touches to his screenplays and getting them out in the market. The elusive Doug Rinaldi can be found here: www.facebook.com/D.R.T.Rinaldi
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For the past thirty plus years **Ken L. Jones** has been a professional writer who has published in practically every medium that a writer can appear in. Among his earliest and most noteworthy accomplishment was as a cartoonist of note whose scripts appeared in the titles of such major publishers as Disney Comics and Harvey Comics where he was a lead writer for *The New Kids On The Block* family of titles. In the last few years he has shifted his emphasis to writing speculative fiction and horror short stories as well as very well received poems of horror which have appeared many times in anthologies and online and which also resulted in his first solo book of poetry (*Bad Harvest and Other Poems)* which was released by Panic Press. In addition to all this he currently is constantly turning in new horror poems to George Wilhite's *Long Intervals of Horrible Sanity* blog which features regularly updated selections of his latest visions of terror. You can find it at the following link: http://georgewilhite.blogspot.com/p/poetry-by-ken-l-jones.html.
In spare moments he is also preparing several books of his non-horror poetry work for possible future publication. Also he has recently put out *The Red Thumbs of Uncle Tickle and Other Poems* at Lulu.

David S. Pointer lives in Murfreesboro, TN, in the United States. His recent poetry collections are *Sinister Splashplay* published by Virgogray Press, available through www.lulu.com, and *Sundrenched Nanosilver* through Blurb Books. David also has work in *Indiana Horror* – 2012, *Indiana Science Fiction* – 2013, and elsewhere. Google search **David S. Pointer** to find out more.

Eric Keys lives on a dead-end, gravel road in a house obscured by dense vegetation on unincorporated land in the Southern United States. His story "A Single Act of Prolonged Vengeance" appears in *A Light in the Darkness*, the inaugural anthology from the authors of *Writing Out Child Abuse*. His story "About a House" is scheduled to appear in the April 2014 issue of *Infernal Ink*

Magazine and his story "Joe the Shitman" is scheduled to appear in the February 2014 issue of *Twisted Dreams Magazine*.
Eric also posts essays and fiction on his blog: http://erickeys.wordpress.com
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Born and raised in Swansea, **Carl Thomas Fox** lives with his fiancé of five years, Samantha Smith, a teacher in a local Primary School in the next village, and their two daughters. Carl also works with children, a teaching assistant in the reception area of a different Primary School where he runs a creative writing club to help children write stories. In fact, the children won a local writing competition recently which saw their stories published. Highly imaginative and prolific, Carl has written several short stories and several novels – including children's picture books. He's currently trying to get published, and is creating vast mythologies and many languages – compiled as full dictionaries with every word translatable via letters and numbers. His favorite genre is primarily horror, but he also likes to pen thrillers, science fiction, sword and sorcery, fantasy, children's novels and picture books. Carl also has skills as an artist, through which he develops his own book covers, symbols and letters. As a pagan with a deep interest in the occult and ancient mythologies, Carl tries to use as much of this as he can in his writing. In fact, all the stories he has written, and others he is planning to write (over a hundred) will all be part of what will soon be known as the *Wellworlds* mythology – a singular mythology on which his work will focus; almost mirroring the Norse idea of Yggdrasil: the tree that all worlds are connected to. This is a life-long ambition that Carl is deeply committed to. If you wish to read one of Carl Fox's novels, one was placed on facebook a while back. It is called The Wolf God, a horror novel about werewolves searching for the final solution.
Carl's facebook: carl.fox.5454@facebook.com

Originally born January 29th, 1969, in the North of England, **Gary Murphy** is the author of collections *Scared Dog – A Horror Anthology*, *Psychosocial – Dark Tales*, and the novel *Adrenalinyte – Dark Romance*, all available on Amazon Books. He is happy living in Egremont, West Cumbria, where he rides a black Vespa and enjoys walking his dog, Chewy. He is a full-time writer, in between buying and selling his first love – antiques. He can be contacted on facebook as **Gaz Vespa** and actively contributes to many Horrified Press publications.

Rishan Singh is a young leader in the field of science. Apart from being published widely in this field, his writing has also won distinction internationally and been exhibited, published and translated in India, America, Ireland, South Africa and the United Kingdom. His autobiographical piece won the *most reads award* in 2005 by *WordMart* in the US. In 2011 he was invited to attend the World Congress of Poets poetry conference in Larissa, Greece, followed by a poetry prize award from the Indian Government. He is a *Golden Key* and *World Poets Society Membership* awardee.

Sergio "ente per ente" Palumbo & Michele Dutcher

I'm an Italian public servant who graduated from Law School, working in the public real estate branch. I've published a fantasy role playing, illustrated Manual, WarBlades, more than 700 pages.Some of my works and short- stories have been published in **American Aphelion Webzine, WeirdYear Webzine, YesterYearFiction, AnotheRealm Magazine, Alien Skin Magazine, Orion's Child Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine, Farther Stars Than These, Digital Dragon Magazine**, **Kalkion Science Fiction and Fantasy Web Magazine, Quantum Muse, Surprising Stories, EMG- ZINE, The Speculative Edge Magazine**, **Australian Antipodean SF, British Webzine Schlock!, Australian SQ Mag**, and in print, inside American Horror Anthology, title:**'Now I Lay Me Down To Reap',** by **Sirens Call Publications**, British Sci-Fi Anthology, title:**'Timeless**

Worlds', by **Schlock! Webzine**, American Fantasy Anthology for shorts-stories, title: **'Limelight: A Golden Light Anthology',** by **Chamberton publishing,** and American Anthology of Historical/Fantasy shorts-stories by the same publisher, title: **'Gaslight: A Golden Light Anthology'.** My stories will appear in print soon as well, inside an American Horror Anthology for short- stories, title: **'Dark Light 2',** by **Crushing Hearts Black Butterfly Publishing,** British Horror Anthology for short- stories, title: **'TALES OF THE UNDEAD - Hell whore Anthology',** by **Horrified Press,** new American Horror Anthology, title: **'Mental Ward: Stories from the Asylum',** by **Sirens Call Publications**, American Horror Anthology for short- stories, title: **'Night Hunters',** by **Static Movement,** American Horror/Steam-punk Anthology for shorts-stories, title: **'Dreadful Legacies',** by **Static Movement Publications,** American Anthology of Urban Fantasy/Horror shorts-stories, title: **'Blood and Guts: An Anthology of the Gross and Disgusting'**, by the same publisher, and then inside an American Anthology of Horror shorts-stories by the same publisher,again, title: **'Love at first bite'**.I am also a scale modeler who likes mostly Science Fiction and Real Space models. Some of my little Dioramas have been shown in Italian (scale model) magazines like, Soldatini, Model Time, Tutto Soldatini, and online, on American site Starship Modeler, Mecha Model Comp, on British SFM: UK site, and Italian SMF.My Sci-Fi/fantasy/Horror short stories in Italian have been published on Alpha Aleph, Alpha Aleph Extra, Algenib, Oltre il Futuro, Nugae 2.0, SogniHorror, La Zona Morta, edizioni, Lo Scudo, Antologia Robot ITA 0.1, Antologia E-Heroes, etc.

Michele Dutcher, aka Bottomdweller, lives in a carriage house in Old Louisville Kentucky with her border collie – Daisy Dukes. She has a BS degree in Elementary Education from Indiana University with minors in theology & sociology, and has been writing Science Fiction stories for about a decade.

James Tierney was born in Northumberland (UK), James now lives in Italy and works at the University of Milan, specialising in the area of Business Administration. Publications to date number several language-based text books. Poetry includes published titles in both the UK and the USA.

Mark Tompkins has been a classical pianist, bartender and has spent the last 22 years in the United States Air Force working with the Minuteman III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) system. He is currently the Air Force Global Strike Command Manager for ICBM safety. His published works include Road Rage, The Fresinnius Chronicles, Pieces, What Grabs You, What Grabs You Too, Arrhythmia and many others. His most recent projects include a zombie serial novel and two more full novels.

Micke Lindquist has previously been published in Bonne Nouvelle, Bento Box and Psychopomp, as well as the "Ugly Babies vol. 2" and "Sex, Drugs & Horror" anthologies from JWK Publishing.

John Patrick Nelson is an Emmy-nominated editor of *Project Runway* and *Jim Henson's Creature Shop Challenge.* His writing can be seen at the Popcorn Fiction website. He lives in Los Angeles.

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Publishing Credits: *What They Left Behind*, Plague Anthology, Horrified Press - 2014. *Our Salvation*, Black Cat Anthology, Horrified Press - 2014. *Step N Play*, Distorted Perceptions Anthology, Death Throes Publishing - 2014. *Burning Snow*, Dark FairyTales Revisited Volume II Anthology, Horrified Press - 2014.

Bruce H. Markuson is married with two children. He lives in Milwaukee WI. He has had a few short stories published and is working on a number of series. He enjoys writing and often finds himself with writer's obsession. He finds the best way to write is to have an ending then write to that ending.

Olivia Arieti is a US citizen, with a degree from the University of Pisa. She lives in Torre del Lago Puccini, Italy with her family. Her plays and poems have been published both in the USA and UK. Her horror stories have been recently accepted by other Static Movement anthologies.

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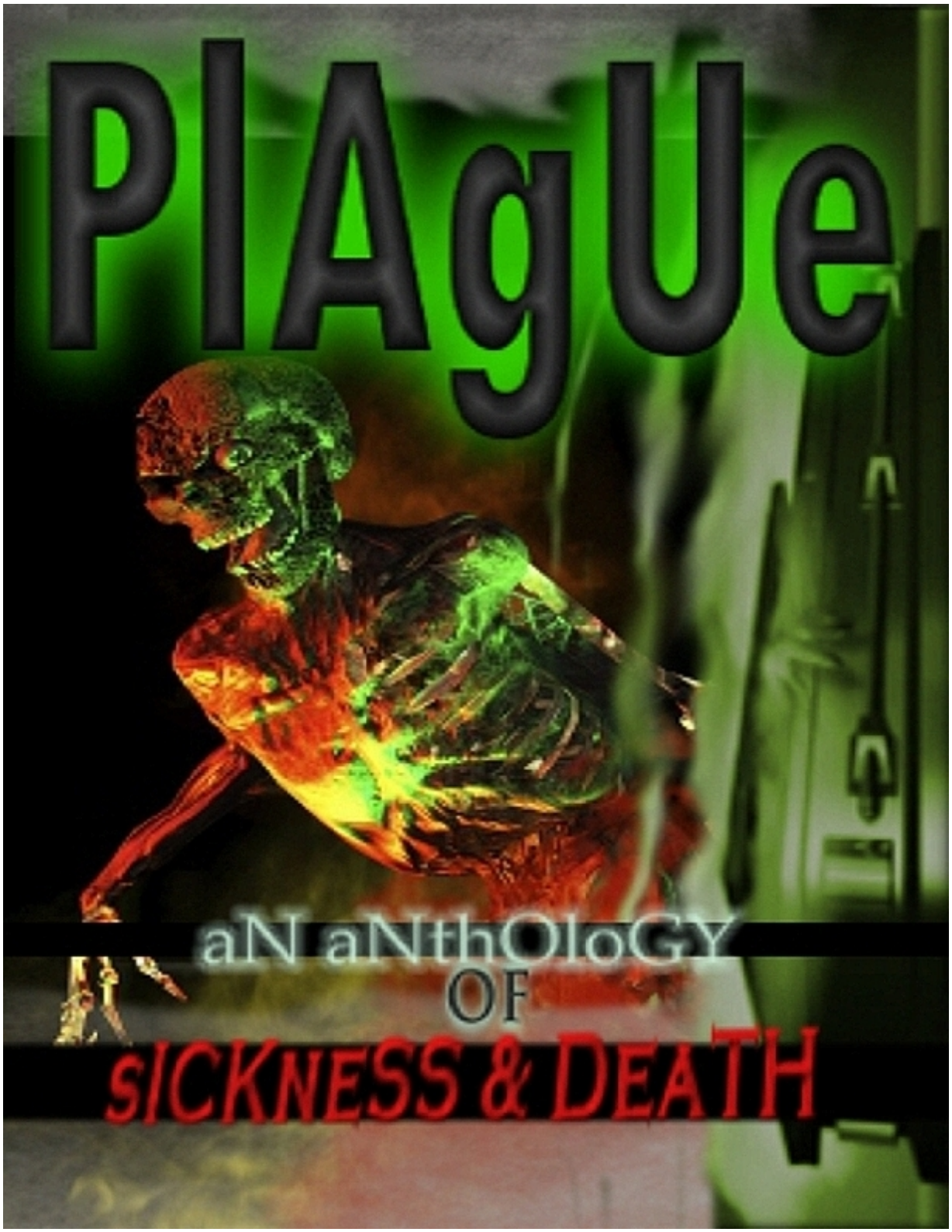
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